LOOK AT THE BIRDS OF THE AIR

Nature Notes and Poems by Barbara H. Conolly
Illustrations by Mollie Eckelberry

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"LOOK AT THE BIRDS OF THE AIR:
THEY NEITHER SOW NOR REAP NOR GATHER INTO BARNS,
AND YET YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER FEEDS THEM.
- Matthew 6:26

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Introduction

"Look at the birds of the air!" See how remarkable they are! Not only have they achieved the mastery of the sky with flight but they live one day at a time without any stored sustenance, lacking any seeming concern; with a total abandonment to providence. A few birds do store some nuts for the future but most of them can't plan the day ahead of them or condition themselves for what faces them in the future. They must rely completely on what the Creator provides for them. Not only birds, but animals and plants must also trust the Lord to grant them their livelihood every day. For us to face each morning of life with that kind of trust would be amazing – and pretty scary.

I spend much of my time making plans, writing lists, driving, shopping, cooking, phoning or E-mailing; taking charge of my life. I set goals and work on projects. I eat, drink, sleep and watch the clock. I think I am in control. But there are times when no matter how carefully I plan or how hard I try, things don't work well and I may even end up in the pits.

Then, if I possibly can, I go to the woods (or field or swamp or shore) to spend some time just being in the natural world, and almost always return feeling eased and refreshed. It seems to me that by going into the woods I have put myself in the presence of all the elements of nature that come first-hand from the mind of God. When I smell the loamy earth, feel the velvet on a mullein leaf, see the flash of orange on an oriole, hear the sweet whistle of a Peeper's song, I know there's nothing second-hand about that experience as there is when I am moved by art or music or literature or architecture. Those

inspirations may have their original source in the Creator but in my way of thinking, they are second-hand through the minds of men.

By stepping into nature, don't we take a step away from the artifacts of civilization? We become absorbed in what we see and hear, smell and feel. We are able to observe how plants and animals live in the natural world. We are free to be surprised by what happens there, and can admit to ourselves that we really don't know much about what makes things tick. Possibly we might even learn a little more about the world we live in and to which we often pay too little attention. Best of all, we can relax in our lack of knowing and be free to enjoy the fact that we don't have to fix anything!

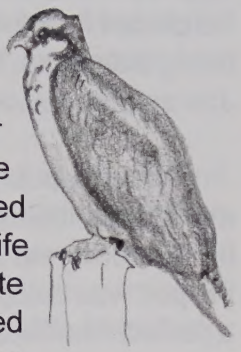
Actually by taking a walk in the woods, I think we are experiencing the spirituality of nature. This is healing for the tension of the body and expansion for the mind and soul – and it might even get us out of the pits.

I have so often wanted to share what I have seen and heard on the lake, in the woods, or on the shore, with others. I really don't want to be alone in feeling the excitement and amazement at the lives of birds and animals around me. So this book is born in an attempt to pass along the joy of what I have discovered in the natural world to you.

Come for a walk with me and let's see what happens!

Barbara H. Conolly

OSPREYS



I have the great good fortune to live on the southeast corner of Beaver Dam Lake, about 600 feet from Bird Roost Preserve which is an acre or so of wet swampy woods west of me, bordering the Beaver Dam Skating Club. The Skating Club donated this patch of woods to the North Shore Wildlife Sanctuary Inc. as it had been a traditional roosting site for herons and cormorants. My husband and I moved here in 1983 so I have been able to keep close tabs on the birds that use the roost and all the other denizens of the lake for the past 30 years.

Watching Ospreys at the nest is an unparalleled treat. Not only are they magnificent birds, breathtaking in flight, but their personalities are amazingly different. To think that they were almost wiped out by the use of DDT in the fifties and sixties! By the end of the seventies there were no Ospreys breeding in Nassau County. The successful return of Ospreys as a breeding bird in Nassau happened in 1984 when the nest on the Joe Dey pole, just north of the Causeway produced young. Mill Neck rejoiced and Joe Dey named the successful parents Oscar and Ophelia.

Subsequently it was decided to erect a pole in Beaver Lake as well. In 1984 Warden Bob Hornosky found a telephone pole washed up on Bayville Beach and with the help of some members of the Mill River Rod and Gun Club got it onto a trailer, hauled it to the Beaver Dam Skating Club, rolled it into the water there and towed it around the corner to a site 25' out in the water from the edge of Bird Roost Preserve where it was erected ready for Osprey occupancy.

However, in 1985 before the Ospreys arrived from the south, Canada Geese took over that nest site. The goose laid some eggs in it, brooded them for a week or two but left them exposed on April16-18 (very cold days). Back on the nest, the goose hissed at the Ospreys which were circling around. After the goose had sat over 50 days (30-35 would have been normal), Bob Hornosky rowed his boat to the pole, anchored it and stabilized it with four poles. From a ladder in the boat, he got up to the nest, chased the geese and pitched the eggs down to my husband and

me in boats below. I was interested in making a scientific study of those eggs so I handed one to my husband Joe who was manning our canoe. He placed it on the bottom of the canoe, but the day being hot, the canoe being aluminum, the metal had heated up and the egg exploded all over Joe and the canoe. That was the end of the scientific experiment!

Ownership of that nest was debatable until 1997 when Necklace and Squirt took over with strength and vigor. For them 1998 was a honeymoon year in which the nest was being built and the bond between the pair was being established. Necklace got her name because she had a perfect necklace of brown spots across her breast while Squirt got his name by being feisty with the Cormorants who were his neighbors in the Maple trees behind him.

On April 11th in 1999, the nest was finished and Necklace was standing tall on the edge of it, facing north. Squirt came flying up from the salt marsh with a piece of black plastic in his talons, like an airplane towing an ad on a banner streaming out behind him. Necklace raised her hackles, rose up, went after him and they had a dogfight, disappearing to the west. My husband and I watched in fascination. Squirt reappeared down by the railroad, swept over the embankment , leveled out low over the water and headed straight for the nest. Necklace rose up high, dove on Squirt and grabbed the black plastic he was towing, ripped it free and dropped it in the water. Squirt kept on going and stayed away for three days. The fourth day he returned, with a stick for the nest. (A peace offering). And the day after that, he brought Necklace a piece of white plastic. That's what she wanted!

In 2002 they produced two chicks, one with a rusty smudge on the back of her neck whom we named Rusty and the other was a small retiring male we called Creepy. That year June was very hot and Necklace was forced to arch her wings over the chicks all day until shade touched the nest at 3:30 P.M. Occasionally she would fly down into the water, cool herself, and then fly back to the nest, dripping on the babies to cool them.

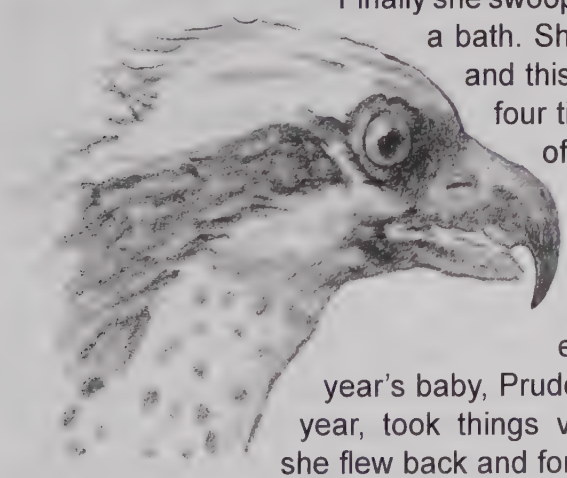
On the 11th of July, Rusty actually flew back and forth across the nest for her first flight. Hooray! Creepy just stared. But on the 14th, they both flew. Four days later, Rusty nearly drowned. She was trying to drag her feet in the water (like an adult), but she fell in and her wings

weren't strong enough yet to lift her out. Necklace was sitting on the nest, watching her. I wondered if she somehow instructed her to paddle about fifty feet to a dead tree on the shore whose roots jutted out of the water. There Rusty hauled herself out and dried off. It took about four hours.

This didn't faze Rusty for the next day, she buzzed her mother and then landed on her father's back, knocking him off the perch, so that he had to go off and catch some breakfast!

The next year Necklace and Squirt had one wobbly little black baby which didn't hatch till June 2 or 3. This meant a lot of shielding from the sun because that was again a hot June. It seemed the heat got to them because Squirt was buzzing at any Cormorants he could see. He went after one and made it dive ten times. Two days later Necklace, not to be outdone, went after one particular Cormorant and made it dive 40 times (the all-time record!). This buzzing seems to be more of a venting of the spleen than a real attack. The Osprey dives at a swimming Cormorant, feet extended, looking fierce. The Cormorant dives and the Osprey swoops up and turns around. The Cormorant has come up for a breath and the Osprey dives at it again so the Cormorant has to dive again. This is more like a game than an attack. I often wonder, "If you caught the Cormorant, what would you do with it?" (The Osprey is strictly a fish-eater.)

This baby, Janet, finally flew in late July and in August was attacked by a young Forster's Tern. The tern made her swoop away at each attack. Finally she swooped right into the water and took a bath. She managed to get out all right and this whole scenario was repeated four times until the participants tired of the game.



In early May of 2004, my husband saw Squirt attack a flying goose and they both ended up in the water! That year's baby, Prudence, hatched on June 12 that year, took things very cautiously. By July 18th, she flew back and forth from one side of the nest to

the other. Two days later she fledged. This was the year that Hurricane Charley blew down the Osprey nest. Prudence, nonplussed by what was left of it, sat on the pointed top of the pole. Following the next hurricane, called Ivan, on Oct.2, Prudence was still sitting on the top of the pole, chirping.

The next year, Necklace was in a decorating mood. Besides two pieces of white plastic, she added a pair of black nylon undies to the nest. The year after that she hooked a big white shopping bag onto the northeast corner of her nest.

In 2009, I saw something large and white and upright in the nest during a heavy rainstorm. I got out the scope to try to make out what it was. It turned out to be Necklace's undersides as she was bending over that year's baby, Handsome, to shield him from the downpour.

In mid-July, Handsome took off one day on his first flight and flew strongly around and around and around until I finally realized he couldn't stop. Squirt was up in the top of an oak and he must have called to Handsome because the young one flew right at Squirt and crash-landed in the oak just as Squirt lifted off. Unflustered, Handsome flew off and 2 hours later he was making three-point landings. That night he was buzzing the Cormorants in their roost trees just like his daddy.

One year, a single female chick was hatched and when she was feathering out, she looked so much like a pretty little quail as she sat in the sun that I called her Katie-the-Quail. But in mid-July one evening I thought we had lost Katie-the-quail. She was in the nest, a gawky teenager then, leaning against Necklace, nibbling her mother's face. Suddenly she collapsed in a heap to the bottom of the nest and lay there for fifteen minutes. Once she lifted her head, but immediately collapsed again. Sometime after 8:00 P.M., Squirt arrived with a fish. The next thing I knew, Katie was into it, wolfing it down. She was just fine after that. Just had a bad day at the office I guess.

The year after that there was another single female chick. She had a little rusty patch on the back of her head and so I called her Bonnet. She hatched in mid-May and her flight day was mid-July in a big thunderstorm. She roosted in a tree that night to stay dry. The next morning, she went to the nest and sat on the nest edge. She tentatively extended one foot

down into it and rapidly pulled it right back. I'm sure I heard her exclaim, "Yuck! I'm not going to sit in that!" She began to chirp for Necklace who soon appeared and led her off to find a drier place to roost!

In, 2013, Necklace decorated her nest with a billowing white thing that looked like a blouse with two boobs in it. Eventually she hooked it to a corner and flew it like a burgee.

On June 1st that year, I went on an all-day field trip to Montauk and got home late. The next morning I knew something was wrong. Squirt and Necklace were sitting on the nest edge. Squirt was lowering and lifting his head up and down to the center of the nest. Necklace sat rigidly and stared into space. An intruding Osprey flew by overhead. This normally would throw Squirt into a rage; he would fly at them and run them off. This time he flew far to the west, climbed high in the sky and just hung out there. Necklace tucked away herself in a tree and made no move to protect the nest from the intruder as he flew back and forth over it. I knew there was no baby in that nest.

Necklace and Squirt continued to maintain the ownership of their nesting site but spent a lot of time just sitting on the nest looking at the woods. After a week or so, I felt Necklace and Squirt were trying to tell us something. The woods they were looking at was the last place where they had seen their baby. I began to understand that, because we had a cool rainy spring, the Tupelos had put on a lot of growth and must have extended their branches far enough out so a Raccoon could jump from them over to the nest and get the baby. No wonder they were staring at the woods, remembering the menace there.

Two weeks later, something happened which led me to realize the baby might have been lost another way. The Egrets and the Cormorants roost in the trees behind the Osprey nest. In late summer there are about 20 Egrets spending the night there and an unknown number of Cormorants higher up in the trees. (Because Cormorants are black, I can't count them until the leaves fall off the trees) I suddenly had a feeling that they weren't there. I got up before dawn the next morning and the roost was totally empty of Egrets. Later in the day I realized that the Cormorants had also deserted the roost. And Necklace was chirping in a tree on the other side of the lake. She had also abandoned the roost. What could have caused this? It had never happened before. I

was really upset.

Two days later, 2 Egrets came back to the roost in the evening, but they left before daybreak. The next day, 8 Egrets came and these stayed the night. Little by little the numbers built up to 20 and the Cormorants also began winging in to the trees for the night. But Necklace never returned. She kept chirping from the other side of the lake. I don't know why. But I think that the event which must have caused such a total abandonment of the roosting trees had to have been that a Great Horned Owl must have moved into the woods. It is such a fierce predator that it would have scared everything away as it could have easily dispatched an Egret or a Cormorant. Great Horneds have to feed their fledglings for many weeks and so are actively hunting at this time of year. But they cannot stay and hunt one patch of woods for long. After all, if you have scared all your prey away, there's nothing left to eat. You might as well leave and go hunting elsewhere!

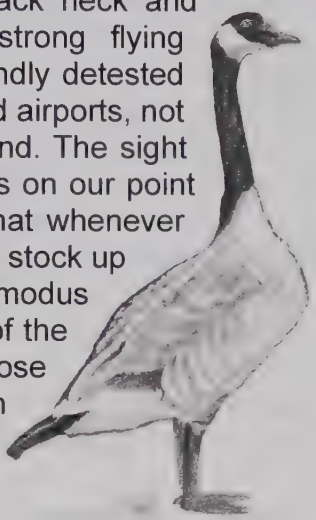
So the Egrets and Cormorants knew it was safe to return. But Necklace didn't return. Could she have been remembering a connection between the owl and the loss of her baby? I pondered that possibility, although it seems odd that it had never happened in all the years that Ospreys raised their babies in that nest. In any case, the season was ending and with it, the need to defend the ownership of the nest. Necklace and Squirt left to journey south to their winter quarters around September 20th. That night there was a full moon – a Harvest moon. It filled the sky. The next morning there was a beautiful moonset across the water, behind the Osprey nest . The moon's path lay wide on the water in a gentle mist. Not a breath of air was stirring. The world was waiting in silence for another day. And all wildlife was at peace.

By late September Necklace and Squirt were well on their way to South America where they could feed on abundant Tilapia to nourish them in the winter. God willing, we hoped to see them come back to raise another family in Beaver Dam in 2014. That would be their 20th nesting season and that would make the birds to be around 25 years of age. I wondered how much longer they could endure the efforts of migration besides the energy and fidelity of raising young. Never mind, there is an Osprey in Scotland who has been nesting 23 years and in 2013 laid her fiftieth egg! Scotland rejoiced!

We'll just wait and see!

CANADA GEESE

Does everyone share my love for the ubiquitous Canada Goose? Not exactly. Despite the fact that Canadas are a uniquely handsome bird with a brown mottled body, sleek black neck and snappy white cheek-patch, possessing strong flying power, intelligence and vigor, they are roundly detested by golf courses, playground maintainers and airports, not to mention owners of lawns like my husband. The sight of fifty of them munching away at the grass on our point used to drive him bananas, so much so that whenever we got to North Carolina, he would stop and stock up on Roman Candles to fire at the geese. His modus operandi was to sneak around the corner of the garage, light a Roman Candle and let fly those zippy colored balls at the flock. The reaction was a dramatic and instant departure – for perhaps three days, and then they'd be back.



But one day when they were back munching, he sneaked around the other side of the house to fool them and let fly a Roman Candle as he crept up on them. But that day, his pants suddenly fell down around his ankles and hobbled him on the spot. Result: the geese continued their mad dash and his wife, looking out the window, almost fell down laughing!

Life with geese around your house is never boring. It becomes uplifting when you see and hear the migrating flocks flying south overhead in the fall in their characteristic vees. And it becomes exciting when some of those vees swing down and decide to rest and recuperate in the lake for a while.

We have close to a hundred geese that are resident birds, year-round, in and around our lake, but when the wintering birds arrive from the north in October and later, we sometimes have over a thousand spending the night on the lake. When they are arriving, flock by flock in October, there is an electric tension in the lake. The voices of the newcomers are high-pitched and intense as they come winging in and the resident geese respond with excitement as well

so the whole lake is fired up by their coming.

If we missed the hour of their arrival in the day, we would know they were in the lake that night because they would wake us up honking at every train that passed by on the trestle at the south end of the lake! Within a week or so, they would become habituated to the trains and the nights would become peaceful again.

Once in the lake, their daily routine becomes a morning flight between an hour and an hour and a half after sunrise to their major feeding ground which is the grassy meadows of Planting Fields Arboretum about a mile south of us as the crow flies. There they graze until mid-day and then return to Beaver Lake for a drink of water, a bath and sometimes a bout of the sillies. One or two birds in a flock will start porpoising under water, splashing wildly, rolling onto their backs and kicking their feet in the air. The commotion is contagious and pretty soon all the geese in the lake are engaging in these shenanigans. One time, I even saw some gulls floating near them on the water join in and do all the same silly stuff!

When that subsides, they resort to preening and resting before an afternoon flight to the feeding grounds, and they do not come back for the night until almost dark. Then it is thrilling to see them winging in against the setting sun, calling their greetings, catching the response of those already in the lake, and hearing them spill the wind out of their wings as they coast in to the water. If they do that over head on a windy night, the sound is like ripping taffeta.

I used to wonder if I was looking at the same geese all winter long and the answer became evident in the years between 1987 and 1997. In 1987, two geese showed up which had yellow neck-bands marked JOOA and J6J4. These birds were no longer evident in late January or February but then J6J4 showed up on the 1st of March, feeding on our lawn. Evidently he had gone elsewhere, presumably further south, and was on his way back north in early spring.

I found that these geese were color-banded by Fish and Wildlife (Dept. of Natural Resources, Ithaca, N.Y.) in an effort to determine their wintering grounds. It certainly helped me realize that their wintering grounds did not consist of one location but probably many. I kept track of the comings and goings of 14 color-coded birds. The champ

was Y1R9, who first appeared in January of 1987 and reappeared in Beaver Lake in 1997, ten years after I had first recorded him.

Other than Canada Geese, a few other species have occasionally tagged along.. Every year or two one or more Snow Geese show up. These are small geese, snow white with black wingtips, close to the size of a Mallard Duck. In 1994, 2 Greater Snow Geese made a rare appearance. They are nearer to the size of Canada Geese. Their home range is way up in the Arctic, their population is small and are they were the only ones I have ever seen here.

In 1999, (and again in 2003 and 2006) a Richardson's Goose put in an appearance. This goose is like a miniature Canada Goose with a very short bill and is a stray from the Mississippi flyway. In 2000 we were elated when we were visited by a Greylag Goose, a gray goose with an orange bill but lacking any white on its face. This species ordinarily resides in Europe and the Middle East and when found here is assumed to be an escape from a collection. There is however, a breeding population in Iceland which could account for its presence. The trick is to see if it wears a collection band on its leg but this one stayed in the water while at Beaver Lake. However, I sneaked up on him at Planting Fields Arboretum where he was grazing in the fields with Canadas and was able to see he had no bands and his legs were fresh and clean as was his plumage, lacking any signs of his having been a captive bird. He was also very wary and though he did not get listed on the Rare Bird Alert, he looked like a genuine wild bird!

Finally, in 2010, we were visited by a Greater White-fronted Goose of the Greenland race. This is a dark gray goose with a white circle around the base of a long orange bill and is rare on the Atlantic Coast as it usually winters in Ireland.

But rare or common, all geese have meant a lot to me. I count it a great privilege to be living where I can see and hear them night and day and in all weather. The power of their flight, the fullness of their presence and the strength of their going and coming is an inspiration to behold. It sometimes moves me mightily. I wrote this poem on one of those days, when I was overwhelmed with sadness to see them go.

Migrant Geese

To wait beside the lake as dawn outlines the resting flocks;
To be aware of growing sound and movement
As birds wake up, regroup to face the wind,
to see black necks stretch and heads toss nervously;

to sense electric tension in every patterned back
and finally be dazzled by the lift-off of a hundred charged-up birds;
To hear their clamor in the air;
To watch them lift and lift
with wings that seek the wind;

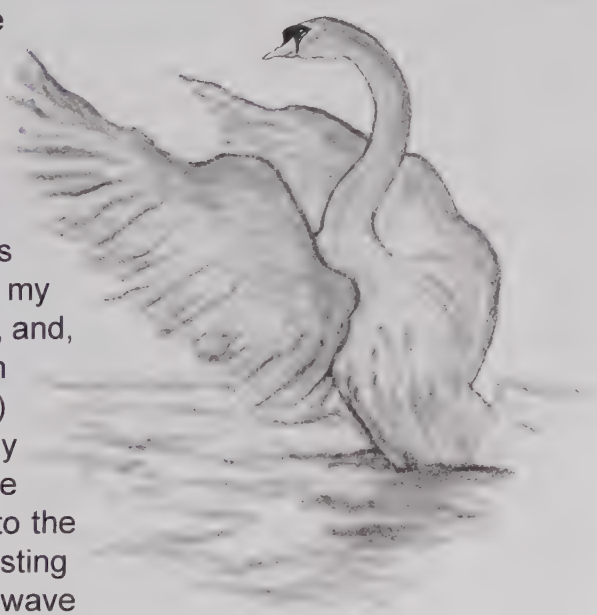
to see them circle, gaining height,
and come flying fast above my head;
to hear the breathless whistle of their wings
until they've disappeared from sight;
to be shaken by the total silence in the place where they have been,
to stand and stare with aching heart
and hollowed soul
beneath the empty sky;
bereft:

That is loneliness.

MUTE SWANS

The biggest and most beautiful birds in the lake are the Mute Swans. It has always been a given that swans and geese don't get along with each other. I took that with a grain of salt as I was constantly looking at dozens of Mute Swans and Canada Geese in the 55 acre lake in front of my house and had seen no evidence of animosity between them. The exception would be when a cob (or male swan) has a family to protect and geese or goslings get too close to his nest. I remember that when my mother lived here forty years ago, a cob which was guarding a family of cygnets on the island drowned more than one gosling which strayed too close.

But some years later on a July 4th I remember well an event that put a different spin on swan/goose relationships. In mid-afternoon that day, I heard distressed honks and much splashing amongst the flock of resident Canada Geese out on the lake. With binoculars I was able to see a goose being repeatedly pulled underwater, surrounded by other geese honking in great distress. A Snapping Turtle evidently had hold of one of the gander's legs and was trying to drown his prospective dinner. The goose was flailing with his wings to no avail while his flock was gathered around, clamoring and unable to help him.



Just then, a swan family with three cygnets came sailing up alongside my point. They paused briefly, and, as if the cob had given an order to the pen (female) and the young ones to stay alongside my property, he turned and power-swam to the conflict with great thrusting strokes, creating a bow-wave

as he went and I thought, "Oh-oh. Is he going to finish off the trapped goose"?

Though my view was partially blocked by the body of the swan, I could see that he surged forward in an attack mode as he plowed into the commotion. I thought that was the end of the goose. But suddenly, the goose popped up free, obviously water-logged but unrestrained, and began swimming slowly away towards the causeway. Another goose came out of the flock and accompanied him to the lake edge where he could dry out and recover.

Then the swan turned and swam steadily back to his family near me. I don't feel like attributing an altruistic motive to the swan. I think it is more likely that the cob saw a chance where he could safely attack his longtime enemy the Snapping Turtle and took advantage of it. I doubt if the damage to the turtle was mortal but I bet it felt good to the swan!

Swan families suffer mightily at the hands of the Snapping Turtle population in our lake and in Shu Swamp pond on the other side of the railroad embankment. A swan pair may start out with six or seven cygnets but they are lucky to be able to raise one. Most pens (mothers) teach their little ones to ride on their backs and thus keep them safe in transit, but that only works when they are very little! It isn't long before the cygnets are too big to fit on the mother's back.

The geese do better. They may show up on my lawn with a sizable brood for a short time, but they soon leave and I think take them down to the salt water to raise them where there are no Snapping Turtles. Could the reason be that because Mute Swans were originally imported from Europe where there are no Snapping Turtles, they lack the inborn genes for keeping babies safe from turtles, whereas geese, ancient residents of the western hemisphere, are genetically equipped with that protective wisdom.

Be that as it may, I once saw a mother Swan do something for a cygnet that really blew me away! I was watching the Swan making her away across the lake. One of her two babies was up on her back, stretching its fuzzy head high, looking like the captain of the ship. The other was desperately trying to get up the tail-ramp but

having no success at all. Suddenly the pen stopped short and spun rapidly to one side. I blinked and there was the second cygnet up with the first! I couldn't believe what I had seen but it must be that the Swan formed a sudden whirlpool by stopping and spinning and the second baby rode up on the crest of the wave she had created. I was stunned by her wisdom and skill.

On the whole, Mute Swans, both adults and young, seem to be inordinately calm and well-behaved birds. I was in for a total surprise on November 27th, 2008. That day I witnessed a swan fight that surpassed in ferocity anything I had ever seen before. Cobs frequently bridle up and flail each other with their wings, and many times a territorial male will curl up his wings and swim with a thrusting bow-wave at other swans that have invaded his territory, but I had never seen anything like what happened that morning! Three pairs of swans had been quietly inhabiting Beaver Lake for that fall, staying in separate sections of the lake, when fifteen strange swans suddenly flew in to join them. One of the resident cobs took offense at this and attacked the newly-arrived cob, presumably their leader. They rose up and flailed each other with their powerful wings while looking to secure a good hold on each other's neck. One succeeded and, shoving the other swan's head under water, held it there for what seemed a long time. He let his opponent's head come up for a breath and then dunked it again. He repeated this for probably ten minutes.

Finally the underdog managed to drag himself to the edge of our island and up onto the earth. I thought: "Thank goodness! He can't be drowned there!" but the attacker followed him up onto the island, grabbed his neck again and forced his head down into the soft dirt, allowing him to come up and breathe every minute or so.

Next, another swan, which presumably was a cob, left the flock of fifteen, which were all floating and watching, creaking and groaning with excitement. He went directly to the attacker and stood up against him, breast to breast. Their wings arched and their necks swelled as they thrust their bills straight up in the air. They held this position for several seconds, emitting deep growls I had never heard from a swan before, and then fell back. They repeated this three times. Then the new arrival turned and left.

Now the attacker went back to work on his victim, thrusting his head down into the dirt and beating him with his wings until he lay absolutely limp on the ground. I thought he had broken its neck. The attacker then waddled off to join the flock, eyeing four young pens among them as he entered the water and promptly selecting one. They immediately began to do a courtship neck dance.

The victim in the meantime lifted his head, saw the coast was clear, stood up and shook himself. His feathers were perfect and he showed no blood at all. Then the idiot followed the path of his attacker down to the water. Immediately the attacker left his girl-friend, flew at the victim and dunked him twice more. Finally that beat-up swan managed to get his body out of there and swam soggily down the lake toward the spillway.

After that, I could no longer see the flock behind the island. But I had been amused to see that, among them a pen who had four half-grown cygnets with her, had kept her young well away from the roiled up adult swans as if they weren't old enough to see such things yet!

In contrast to disturbances like this, the usual demeanor of swans is calm, graceful and dignified. And their nuptial dance is breathtaking to behold. A pair of swans will swim up to each other. The feathers on their necks swell and they swim close, side by side. They begin perfectly synchronized movements: two heads dive down, two heads come up, two heads reach back to trim their outside wing feathers, two heads come back; two heads pluck at their breasts, lift up; two heads fling themselves back on their wings, lift up; two heads pluck at their back feathers and come up. Slowly gaining speed, they continue the dance, always pairing their actions, moving faster and faster, pressing against each other. Finally the cob reaches over to grab the back of the pen's neck, presses her down in the water and copulation occurs. Afterwards they throw water over their backs and flap their wings with vigor. The dance is over.

Swans are non-migratory and stay together for life unless something catastrophic happens. Something catastrophic did happen in the year 2000 to the pair of Swans that use Shu Swamp for a nesting ground, coming and going through the railroad tunnel to Beaver Lake. That year the pen was brooding her eggs on a nest

in the marshy pond, easily visible to visitors on the viewing platform. One morning, she was found dead on the nest. Tom (our warden) retrieved the body but could not find the cause of her death.

In the evening of the next day, my husband called my attention to a male swan spinning crazily in the lake very close to our house. He would spin to the left in tight fast circles with his tail cocked at right angles. Then he'd stop and put his head down in the water. Next he repeated the spin to the other side, stopped and lowered his head to the water. He did this 5 or 6 times. Finally, just at dark, he swam through the tunnel into Shu Swamp. Tom caught him there the next day to check him but found no mono-filament line wrapped around him, nor had he been attacked by a turtle. After two days, the spinning subsided and was done. I asked some knowledgeable people if they had ever seen anything like this spinning but the response was negative. I wondered if someone had fed something to the pair that killed the pen and had this effect on the cob but I really don't know. Could it have been an expression of grief?

That wasn't the end of the spinning swans! Two years later I carefully watched a pair of Swans over near the Osprey platform, across the lake from me. There was a third swan, a pen on a nest in the bushes behind the osprey platform. The two swans in the lake were perhaps fifty feet away. They fluffed out their wings, arched their necks, and, separately, about three feet apart, began to spin to the left as if anchored there. After five or six spins, they stopped and began to spin the other way. Then back again left, and back again right. Meanwhile the pen on the nest dozed and ignored the whole show though it was in plain sight. And I was left with another mystery to ponder. What was that all about?

The next year, 2004, I had another Swan mystery to ponder. It was caused by a Mute Swan cob down in Mill Pond in Oyster Bay. On May 14th, that swan was cuddled up next to the right front tire of a cream-colored Buick parked in the yard of a house right next to the pond. While stopped for a red light there, I saw him nibble up and down the fender of the car around to the front and back again. Then the light changed and I had to drive on. The next day I had a call from a friend named Judy who asked what that swan was doing making out with the Buick next to Mill Pond in Oyster Bay? The day after that,

another friend telephoned to say that he had seen, from his bicycle, a swan obviously in love with a cream-colored Buick in Oyster Bay. Two days later, that Swan was reunited with his wife and three little cygnets in the pond and the affair was over. Mid-life crisis?

Accounting for the number of swans on Beaver Lake at one time is sometimes puzzling. Their chief food supply here is the green algae that lies on the muddy bottom. There are two blooms of algae, one begins in April and dies by the end of July. The second begins in August and continues till the very coldest weather. The highest counts of swans I have recorded in the lake are 117 on Sept. 30, 1987 and 136 on Nov. 2, 1984. Those were pretty high fall counts. Was it due to an abundance of algae?

I feel so privileged to have the swans around me. They are incredibly graceful and undeniably beautiful. Seeing them enhances my life, but what really touches me most deeply is their aura of calmness and wisdom, their other-worldliness. I often wish I could absorb some of that. Watching swans often brings me to a point of peace.

THE SHORTEST DAY OF THE YEAR

Rays of evening light lay on a small black pond
one short December day.
A Mute Swan was swimming there,
etching curves and lines
in silent water;
immaculately white on water black as ink.

The bird swam slowly near.
He did not look at me
but kept me company
while I was there,
just slowly feeding
on aquatic plants
growing in the mud of the pond.

I waited but he did not leave.

Then, quietly, a presence came,
like a mist that gently rose from nowhere,
unsummoned, unexpected,
it enveloped me.
Suddenly aware of holiness,
I breathed with reverent care.

I was being shown the glory of creation
inherent in simple things;
a bird, a pond, sunlight and mud.
At once conviction came:
just as certain as the air I breathed
I knew for sure
that God was there
in a white swan on a black pond.

DUCKS

Who has not seen a flock of Mallards being fed a handout by children (and adults) at a park or village pond? Ubiquitous, handsome, ridiculously tame, they are often beneath our notice. We hear their loud "Quack, quack, quack" and pay little attention. Successful and smart, Mallards have waddled into our civilization with great aplomb and have met with the hazards they have found with a debonair attitude, successfully coping with dogs, cars, noise, kids and altered landscapes in which to find their food, raise their young and avoid destruction. In varying ways, people ignore, tolerate or encourage them and generally manage to avoid killing them when they get on the roads.

I was witness to the warm-heartedness of a number of drivers on the Cross-Island Parkway on June 5, 1958. I was due to have a baby in July and hurrying home from my tenth college reunion at Barnard College in New York that afternoon having noticed that the oddness I was feeling at the college was somewhat similar to labor pains. My baby wasn't due for five more weeks so I presumed it was a false alarm. However after crossing the Triboro Bridge I began to drive a little faster as the symptoms were accelerating.

Then I encountered a big jam on the Cross Island Parkway and had to stop in traffic. I was anxiously timing contractions when I got a glimpse of the cause of the tie-up. A mother Mallard was serenely leading a parade of 17 newly hatched ducklings across the four lanes of the divided highway on her way to the salt-marsh. And all four lanes stopped to safeguard the little procession! My contractions were down to five minutes at that point and I wondered how much training and equipment that state troopers have for delivering babies on their highways. But the duck and her family got across, and I got home just in time to make a dash for the hospital where my daughter put in an early appearance on June 6th at 2 A.M. Maybe that's why she is a birdwatcher!

Mallards may often be on close terms with people but another duck resident around here most definitely avoids any familiarity with human beings and that is the gorgeous little Wood Duck. The male is stunning in his harlequin patterns and sassy tassle on the back of his head. Even the female will bring you up short with the bold white ring around her eye enlivening what would otherwise be a modest dress of earthy colors.

We have put up a Wood Duck nesting box in the protected water inside our island and it has often been a successful home for broods of Wood Duck ducklings. (In the depth of winter it has even sheltered Screech Owls occasionally!) In mid-March of 1990, I noticed and odd-plumaged Wood Duck hanging around our nest-box and our neighbor's Wood Duck box nearby. It had male plumage on its neck and wings but a female's white eye-ring. Its actions were rather brusque and restless and it seemed to dominate the normal male which was in attendance. Curious, I called the Bronx Zoo and was told that, yes, occasionally female Wood Ducks will sport male plumage. So I called her "Butch".

On May 3rd she sat peacefully in the door of our Wood Duck box. On May 12th, there was a commotion at my neighbor Laura's Wood Duck box. There was already a Wood Duck hen on eggs inside but Butch and her hubby had been sitting on the top of the box for nearly two weeks. The duck inside held fast. Butch laid an egg on the roof which rolled off into the water. That afternoon, Bob, our then Sanctuary warden, put up another Wood Duck box near Laura's, and Butch moved in.

May 13th was Mother's Day and there was peace among the Wood Ducks - but not for long. Two days later, Butch was back on top of the first Wood Duck box roof.

On May 19th, the resident Wood Duck hen managed to get her 8 little puffball ducklings out of that box and swam off with them.

On June 9th, Butch was seen taking egg-shells out of Laura's Wood Duck box. All was quiet until July 23rd when Laura reported that Butch was nesting in that box. That seemed strange because all the male Wood Ducks were in eclipse (molted) plumage by then and wouldn't be breeding. However she sat in that box till August 12 (19 days), then left the nest. Oddly, then there were broken egg-shells on the top of the box. It seems that Butch was having trouble being motherly.

By October 6th, Butch was in eclipse plumage, but on October 18th, she swam by in glorious plumage. Here ended the first lesson.

Having gone south for the winter, Butch reappeared on March 15, 1992 and sat on Laura's Wood Duck box. I saw nothing of Butch until April 28 when she moved into Laura's recently vacated Wood Duck box

while her normal Wood Duck husband sat on the top. And that was the last time I saw her. I don't know what happened to her but after that season, only normal Wood Duck females used our two Wood Duck boxes.

On October 2 of that year, no less than eight gorgeous male Wood Ducks were on our lawn, scarfing up acorns which had fallen from our big Pin Oak tree. What a sight that was to behold!

Two years later a (normal) female Wood Duck was cruising by our place with 16 tiny babies behind her like a string of ping-pong balls. All of a sudden, something startled the mother and in a flash all 16 instantly submerged and swam a yard or more before they popped up. An emergency practice drill!

In the spring of last year, a pair of Wood Ducks came flying across the lake one afternoon. The male flew behind our island but the female veered over our lawn right past me, made a fine looping approach to our Wood Duck box and crashed into the front of the box below the front door. Oops. She fell into the water, shook her head and swam around behind the island. Must be a new bride I thought. I got busy in the garden and ten minutes later, here she came again. This time she made a perfect loop and shot into the front door of the box. Everybody needs practice I guess.

A number of ducks other than Mallards and Wood Ducks use our lake for wintering or stopping over during migration:

Buffleheads are perky little ducks with a big white bonnets on their heads which usually find Mill Pond in Oyster Bay more to their liking but one April day in 1997, 5 Buffleheads appeared in Beaver Lake and began courting which is a sight I had not seen before. Two males were trying to woo three females and this involved a huge amount of leaping, splashing and head tossing. The outcome was unknown as they flew away to continue elsewhere.

Gadwalls are more frequent visitors and small flocks may winter here. They are modest colored but handsome ducks, the males grey-bodied with tan heads, but possessing an odd voice: "Urk, urk, urk!" It's usually by that call that I know they are in the lake. A special treat on one day in March 2001, was the sight of a record-breaking 105 Gadwalls in Beaver Lake, a migrant flock that moved on the next day.

Mergansers, those snappy-looking fish-catching ducks with sharply-serrated bills equipped for holding slippery fish, are always a delight to see. The largest of them, the American Merganser, with an eye-catching white side, shows up in January and February provided the lake is unfrozen. Even when the lake is partially frozen, I've seen them dive from open water and swim under the ice, then pop back out again. Is it because the shelter of an ice roof draws the fish up from the bottom making them easier to catch?

When they're not fishing, they're courting. One January, five males showed off to impress one female, zipping around, scooting here and there, lifting themselves up on their tails and occasionally tearing across the water at great speed. It was a stunning show! They breed in the far north so we don't get to see their courtship very often!

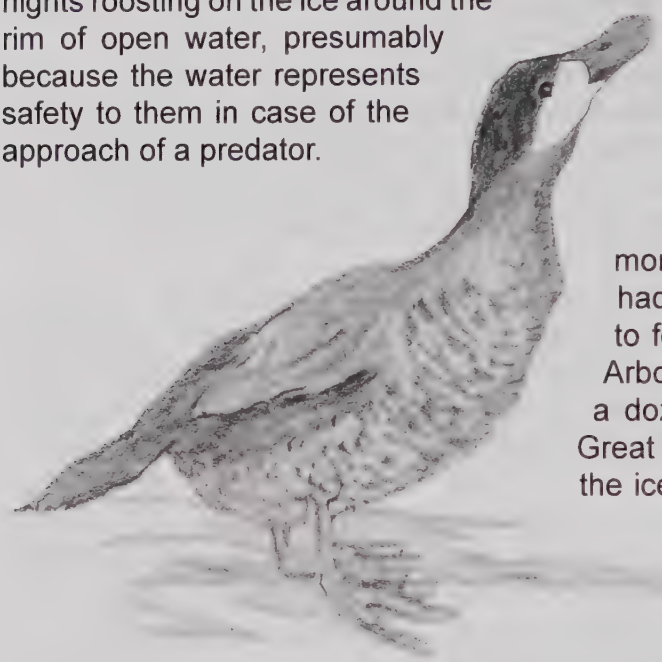
In the winter of 1987, there were still 15 wintering American Mergansers in the lake. A female of the flock swam over to my neighbor Laura's Wood Duck box and sailed around and around it looking up at it, evidently having a thought. Finally she flew up and sat on it for a while. When she turned, she abruptly fell off it into the water. Well, so much for that good idea!

We are always keeping an eye out for the next smaller-sized Merganser, the Red-breasted. It is more partial to salt water in winter and only once have I seen one in the fresh water of Beaver Lake. In summer it breeds north of the United States and in winter it inhabits the ocean and Long Island Sound.

The smallest Merganser, the Hooded, is a breath-taking little duck. When the male erects his blazing white hood with its black edge and sails across the pond, with his bright bay side framed by black and white stripes, you can be sure any female Hoodie around is going to sit up and take notice! Even the female's erected hood, though in subdued earth colors, is a lacy wonder, especially when backlit by sunlight. Hoodies breed in northern United States, west of here and all over Canada. A beautiful little duck!

Other duck species like Pintail, Wigeon, Green-winged Teal, Canvasback, Lesser and Greater Scaup, Black Duck and Ringneck have shown up in Beaver Lake but not regularly.

Ruddy Ducks, with white cheeks to set off their rust-colored bodies, usually put in a brief appearance, never more than three birds. One Ruddy Duck, who came alone, never made it out of here. It was the 26th of January in the year 2000 and the lake was totally frozen but for an open area in the middle, which is the result of the Beaver Dam Skating Club's discharge of warm water due to their ice-making activities. Wintering Canada Geese like to spend the nights roosting on the ice around the rim of open water, presumably because the water represents safety to them in case of the approach of a predator.



On this particular morning, about 800 geese had flown out that morning to feed in Planting Fields Arboretum, leaving half a dozen gulls, including a Great Black-backed Gull, on the ice edge, and one male Ruddy Duck floating in the water all alone. I noticed a Great Blue Heron winging over toward the Great Black-backed. He landed in front of the gull in the shallow water and made two lunges at him. I grabbed my binoculars and then I could see that the gull was in the act of dispatching the Ruddy Duck! The Gull succeeded in keeping it away from the heron and when he had finished killing it, dragged it up on the ice to eat it. Immediately three Crows formed a respectful cordon around him. Suddenly the three Crows took off and even the Great Black-backed Gull took off and left his hard-earned meal. A Redtail Hawk landed on the carcass, clutched it in his talons and flew away with it to eat it in privacy! In the dead of winter, everybody's hungry and even a killer may not fill his belly!

Early in October, 2009, I lost my fondness for one species of duck which is not a native wild duck but is often released in a pond – and

now I know why! I was walking to the viewing platform by the pond in Shu Swamp Preserve and noticed two white Muscovy Ducks lying in the sun on the center platform. The male got up and waddled toward me, followed by the female, and I presumed they were looking for a handout . But instead they rushed at my legs and bit me about six times. They were strong and determined and evaded my attempts to kick them off but fortunately they didn't break the skin as I had on heavy denims. I finally got away after four separate attacks, upset and disgusted! After this, the male was seen ailing. Finally both disappeared and presumably died. I wondered if the Avian Flu that was then in the area could have caused that inordinate rage? I'll never know.

One of the most unusual ducks which very seldom appears in Beaver Lake is the Shoveler. It is a fairly small duck and the male is brightly colored with a green head, white breast and bright bay side, while the female is tan. But the amazing feature that they both possess is a great big shovel-shaped bill which is equipped with a comb for sieving invertebrates out of soft mud and water. Being chiefly a western duck, we seldom get to see them on Long Island.

Having counted a nice little flock of them in the De Seversky Conference Center pond near Greenvale during the Audubon Christmas Count of 2008, I stopped to check that pond the following year in November. Not a flock but a single male Shoveler was there. As I watched, he was doing something odd. He had his head deep down in the water and was describing clockwise circles, pivoting on his submerged bill. It looked for all the world as if he was auguring a hole in the bottom. Thirty minutes later he was still doing it. There must have been something delectable down there!

Ducks that never grace our pond are the three species of Scoter; Black, Surf and White-winged, also Common Eider and King Eider, Harlequin Duck and Old-squaw, now known as Long-tailed Duck! These all hug the salt water in winter and to see them, we have to journey to Jones Beach. The Old-squaw is a particularly salty duck, frequently seen, zipping between combers out in the ocean in the roughest seas. It makes our pond ducks look pretty tame!

April Storm

Oldsquaw ducks, streamlined bullets
shooting out to sea,
leaving shelter far behind,
leaning on a northeast wind,
heading straight for Maine.
In nonchalance they pierce the rain,
hurried by an inner urge I cannot know

They round the pier where spume is flung
skyhigh on jetty rocks and channel bell.
They draw a line in ocean troughs
between the walls of cresting waves,
straight into the savage gale.

I watch until my face is numb
But they have gone away.
Wind and rain still lash the waves,
turmoil churns an empty sea.

They've left behind a lonely space
where they once were.
Bullets do not leave a trace
to mark the pathways of their flight.

Later, in my heated car,
I pour my steaming tea, unwrap my lunch,
rub my icy hands, and wonder –
how would it feel
to meet your life with such fantastic fire?

HAWKS, EAGLES, OWLS AND TURKEYS

HAWKS

Hawks come in assorted shapes and sizes, each species formed for the life it is to lead:

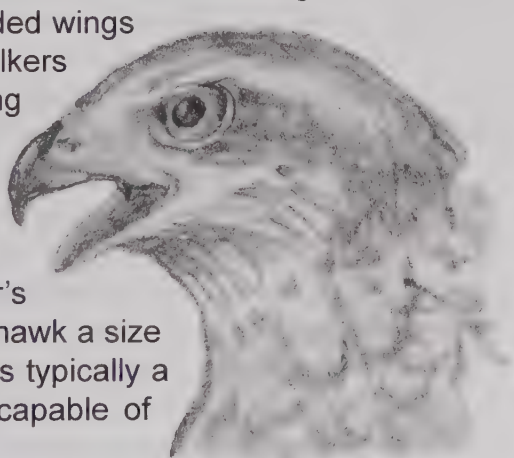
Buteos are big-winged and broad-tailed, equipped for their ability to soar and master the wind: on Long Island they are the Red-tailed, the Red-shouldered, the Broad-winged and the uncommon winter visitant, the Roughlegged.

Eagles are related to Buteos, are huge, have very long wings which they flatten when soaring. Bald Eagles live on fish and carrion and occur occasionally on Long Island while Golden Eagles eat rabbits and large rodents and are extremely rare on Long Island. Both occasionally partake of road kill.

Falcons have long and narrow wings and long tails; they are the speed-demons of the hawk world, adapted for overtaking birds and have strong and rapid wing-beats: on Long Island they are the American Kestrel, the Merlin, the Peregrine and the rare winter visitor, the Gyrfalcon. The Kestrel is the size of a Jay, the Merlin the size of a pigeon, the Peregrine the size of a Crow and the Gyrfalcon a size larger than a Peregrine.

Kites resemble falcons with long narrow wings, but have a buoyant flight, not speedy, and are accidental on Long Island.

Accipiters have short, rounded wings and long tails: they are the stalkers and darters, equipped for hunting in the woods. On Long Island, they are the Sharp-shinned, the Cooper's and rarely the Northern Goshawk. The Sharpie is the size of a Jay, the Cooper's the size of a Crow, and the Goshawk a size larger than that. Accipiter flight is typically a flap-flap-flap glide though it is capable of soaring on a thermal.



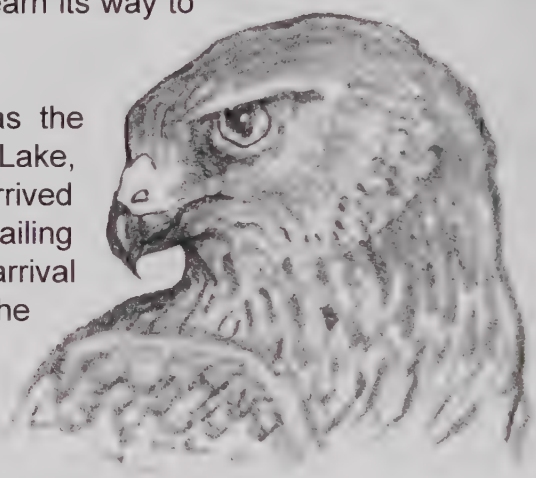
Northern Goshawk

Ospreys are in a family by themselves. They are large fish-catching birds of prey, often confused with Bald Eagles because of their white heads though adult eagles also have a white tail. They plunge for their fish feet-

first (while Bald Eagles usually glide-snatch their prey), and, when navigating the sky fly with a bend in their wings while Eagles are flat-winged.

The final group are **Harriers**, commonly known as Marsh Hawks. They have long tails and long wings, flying over marshes with wings held up in a rocking motion. They are commonest over salt marshes on Long Island.

Of all the hawks, the Redtail is the most visible and most frequently recorded here. Handsome and beloved, drawing your eyes upward, it seems like the King of the airways. Well, almost always, but like all noble creatures it has to learn its way to nobility.



On August 18th, 1989, as the sun was rising over Beaver Lake, an immature Redtail Hawk arrived from the woods to the west, trailing a scarf of heckling Crows. His arrival caused 60 Cormorants in the Bird Roost Preserve to take to the air from their roost trees. In a debonair fashion the young Redtail dove at an immature Cormorant (almost double his size) and forced it to crash dive into the water. He then tried 3 or 4 of the Cormorants' Red Maple perches for size, hopping from one to another. In the air again, he spied a 6" stub sticking out of a dead oak branch and tried to land on it. The only trouble was that another branch curved over the stub and, in dodging it, he ended up upside down, hanging by his feet from it. Flapping wildly, he tried releasing one foot. That made matters worse and brought the Crows back. They encouraged him to try harder and he finally got right side up. Next he crashed into the thick top of a Tupelo, and a startled Cedar Waxwing shot out of the other side. Extricating himself from the branches, he then took a bead on the Osprey platform and overshot it by a foot, lowering his feet into empty air. Undaunted, he had another go at the 6" snag, and this time landed on it perfectly! Off again, he tried the end of a Red Maple branch with a little tuft of red leaves.

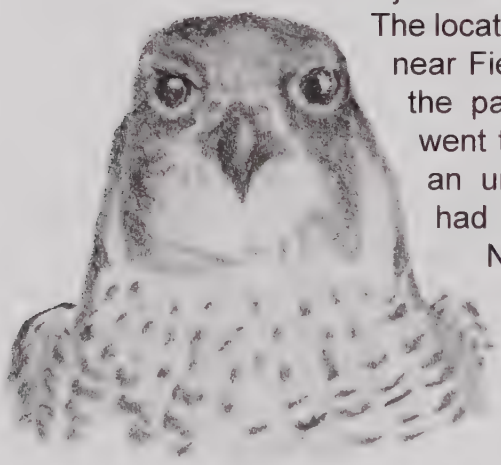
Weak and twiggy, it sank under his weight, dumping him upside down, and as he righted himself, he ripped off a spray of red leaves and flew off with it. Then he tried the platform again, and this time he was a foot to the side of it! So he tried the stub once more and misfired again. He hung there upside down like a chicken in the market, making a couple of tries to right himself but having to rest in between. Eventually he got up and flew to a tree about 30' from the nesting platform. Taking careful aim at the platform, he flew to it and, success!, landed on the wooden palette which forms the top of it. However, the slats were a little too wide for his feet and he hopscotched from one to another, looking for a better grip but there was none. So he flew off to Shu Swamp. In 20 minutes or so, the Cormorants returned. The Redtail soon reappeared with some small black prey item in his feet which he pummeled and partially consumed on the wing. The Cormorants were unperturbed. He went back to Shu Swamp to finish his meal, then returned for some practice soaring on the morning thermals. This time, the Cormorants took off again and went towards the sea. After 10 or 15 minutes of soaring practice, he went back to the west woods from whence he came and disappeared 45 minutes from the time he first appeared. Probably needed a nap!

Redtails are handsome hawks with wide wings and, if adult, have a vivid burnt-red tail, visible when they bank and turn. They are masters at soaring on thermals high in the air, sometimes emitting rasping calls as they go. Their preferred method of hunting is to spot prey from the air and then move close before pouncing. However, they are not limited to this kind of airy approach. One time I watched a Redtail swiftly swoop and kill a rat on our lawn and then sit with it in our Maple tree so close that I took a picture of that successful predator with a long skinny rat tail hanging down from his feet just twenty feet away.

In 1997, our local Redtail, which had shown unusual prowess at catching birds, nailed a Crow one day on our lawn. The crow's flock-mates went berserk in the overhead Oaks. I called my husband to come see as the hawk was hopping along the ground dragging his kill with him. The commotion was too much for him and he nervously flew away. Sometime later when all was quiet, he came back and fed on the carcass. When we looked out that evening, there was only a pile of black feathers left. So much for that Crow! The local flock of crows became extremely antsy after that.

A bigger surprise was a warm August day in 2000 when I was watering hanging fuchsia plants on my porch. There is a hummingbird feeder next to one of the fuchsias. I heard a small sound and turned just as a large bird roared through the porch between me and the feeder. It was a mature Redtail Hawk! It must have been making a strike at a Hummingbird I hadn't seen. The boldness of that strike took my breath away. The more usual view of a Redtail is seeing it soaring in thermals up in the sky, eying fields and hedgerows for a mouse or squirrel or rabbit. On Long Island, it is remarkable to see how Redtails have fitted into civilization. For several years I used to see one that had his lookout perch along the Expressway at Glen Cove Road where he could survey a good stretch of grass for small rodents beside the busy highway.

But the place to really get a good look at more furtive hawks is the Fire Island Hawk Watch. Choose a day in October when the wind has just switched around to the Northwest. The location of the Watch is on Fire Island, near Field 5 and close to the path from the parking area to the lighthouse. I went there on October 8th in 2008 on an unpropitious day when the wind had backed around to the south. Nevertheless I saw 2 Kestrels, 2 Merlins and 2 Marsh Hawks. I spoke to the folks who manned the station that day and I got the "shoulda-been-here-yesterday story".



The wind had been Northwest on October 7th and 1100 hawks passed the lookout, of which 700 were Kestrels. There were also Merlins and Ospreys and Sharp-shinneds and Cooper's and Marsh Hawks besides 3 Peregrines and 2 Bald Eagles! Plus 80 Snow Geese. I was "a day late and a dollar short!"

Another day on Fire Island with a northwest wind, I walked in the dunes towards the western tip. I noticed a strange hawk quartering the dunes in an irregular way. Its flight was leisurely – a lift and glide – different from the soaring flights of Buteos or the rowing flight of

falcons or the flap-flap-flap glide of Accipiters. It had large pointed wings but the oddest thing about it was its color – chocolate-brown with a white head! When I got home I got out all the available books I had on bird identification. I knew it had to be a Kite by its shape and finally one book showed this plumage to be that of an immature Mississippi Kite – a rarity on Long Island and a Life Bird for me!

Why do hawks favor flying along the barrier beach? Well, in the first place as they come down from New England and head south in the fall, they can't go any farther. Also the helpful NW wind is unimpeded by civilization out there. But it is mostly because a multitude of small birds are also flying there, drawn by the abundance of fruiting plants along the barrier beach which serve as food to them as they migrate south for the winter. A few of them will serve as food for hawks. Everybody needs fuel for the journey!

A small bird-catching hawk which amuses me is the Sharp-shinned. Sharpies are sassy and always seem to forget how little they are. They are the size of a Bluejay but lack compunction about the size and number of the birds they are harassing. One September day in 1994 I watched a Sharpie dive repeatedly at two Bluejays and two Flickers, all the while screeching like a Parakeet. I had to conclude he was just venting his spleen as he migrated southward. Venting the spleen seems to come naturally to that little hawk. Some years later I watched a Sharpie screech and fly at a member of a large group of Bluejays sitting in a dead tree. The Jay he aimed for would just sidestep the attack and then all the Jays would change position. After a pause, the hawk would screech and fly at another Jay and the process was repeated. The game was still being played when I left twenty minutes later!

The Sharpie that really amazed me was one that had been haunting our bird feeder a few years later. This was an immature that killed a Mourning Dove on the lawn of our point in Mill Neck. Geese and Ducks in the lake gathered around the point to glare at him. He was standing on the body of the dove but had trouble balancing there because the dove was more than equal to his size and weight. He hung on, teetering, and nervously keeping an eye on his attentive and angry audience. I was on the phone with my daughter in Seattle, describing this event, and I had just said, "Well, one thing is certain,

he'll never be able to carry his prey away", whereupon he took off, carrying the dove quite easily and disappeared in the woods with his dinner!

Another Sharpie, intently pursuing a small bird, flew into Randy Harrison's kitchen on November 8, 2005. When it got tangled in the dining room curtains, Randy was able to catch it and toss it out the door to freedom. The small bird it was pursuing got out the door in the commotion without being identified!

Sharpies and Cooper's Hawks are winter visitors, attracted by the number of bird feeders we Long Islanders maintain. Sharpies and Cooper's do not eat seed but they do eat the small birds that eat the seed. If your busy feeding station suddenly becomes silent and empty of customers, it can be because a Sharpie or a Cooper's is skulking around in the foliage nearby. How the birds learn the hawk is there is a mystery to me. No signal seems to be given but the premises can be vacated instantly. However, there are times when the hawks' sneak attack works and they get to eat too.

A young Cooper's Hawk was checking out my bird feeder in January of 2008. He froze on a low branch of the Birch tree and, because I was in a car, allowed me to sit and admire his handsome brown feathering, bright yellow legs and fierce expression for several minutes. I carry that picture in my mind every time I hear Cooper's Hawk mentioned.

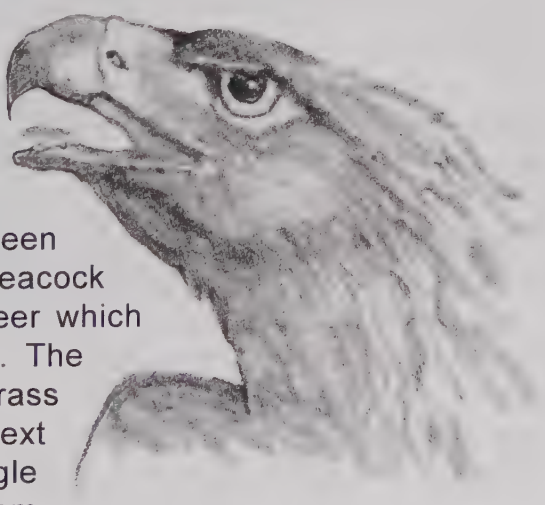
One day in August 1994, I thought I heard an Osprey calling "boodle-eep" in the sky but it turned out to be a young Red-shouldered Hawk with black patches on its stomach which showed its age to be about 18 months. Five days later, Judith Chapman reported that she heard a hawk warbling "boodle-eep" high in the air at Piping Rock Club as she played golf. Finally, on September 11th, a young Red-shouldered Hawk, probably the same bird, soared over Beaver Dam and disappeared. Red-shouldered Hawks are pretty uncommon on Long Island and no one I talked to at that time had ever heard one warble " boodle-eep" before! That call belongs to an Osprey. The hawk must have heard it where he spent the summer, admired it, and put it into his repertoire!

On a July day in 1997, I was walking in Coffin Woods when a piercing whistle stopped me in my tracks. There, over my head was a Broadwing Hawk, the smallest Buteo possessing a distinctly banded tail. Since he continued to whistle at me and refused to fly away, I wondered if he might be nesting. I didn't find a nest right away but on Aug. 1st, I finally spotted it in a deep crotch of the same large Sweet Birch where the adult had been. Suddenly, a newly-fledged young hawk flew out of the crown of the tree. A confirmed nesting record!

EAGLES

Another nesting record we would like to discover would be that of a Bald Eagle. These huge birds get reported on Long Island off and on, usually in migration but occasionally as wintering birds. In the early 1980s an immature Bald Eagle roosted in the trees on the end of a homestead called Viewpoint overlooking the upper end of Mill Neck Creek, and came back to sit in the same trees the following two winters.

In September of 1998, Jim Madden spotted two Bald Eagles in Shu Swamp. It happened to be the same day that a Great Horned Owl was calling persistently in the woods there at 3:00 in the afternoon. It was a bright sunny day when owls are not likely to be out and about or hooting. Later, when Jim told me about the sighting of the two Bald Eagles, I wondered if their presence could have stirred up the owl. Perhaps. I'd love to know! That would be two great birds to find at once!



An interesting find of a Bald Eagle in our vicinity occurred on Halloween in 2001. An employee at Peacock Point was butchering a deer which had been shot elsewhere. The carcass was on the grass behind a house and the next day there was a Bald Eagle gleaning the remains! Tom

Hornosky, North Shore Wildlife Sanctuary's warden, was lucky enough to get a good look at the bird. Not your usual Eagle sighting!

Not long afterwards, Lois Lindberg spotted an eagle in Roslyn Harbor – perhaps the same one?

And in February of 2006, an immature Bald Eagle sat in Nancy Shea's oak tree for four hours. Alas, I was away at the time!

Recently, in the summer of 2012, two emaciated young Bald Eagles were rescued from the Long Island Sound area – one floundering in the water off Asharoken and the other on the beach at Bayville. Both were captured and taken to the Raptor Rehabilitation Center in New Jersey for R and R and eventual release. Added to that, a mature Bald Eagle was sighted in the vicinity of Bayville which led to the conjecture that there might be an unknown nest in the vicinity. Everyone began looking for a nest - that would be a first in Nassau County.

The most fun we had in eagle-spotting around here was a winter about 20 years ago. Word got out that a young Bald Eagle had taken up residence in the heart of Glen Cove. The way to see this bird was to park in the ample Staples parking lot and look to the east across the road. The eagle frequently sat on the tops of the store fronts there. It seems that the employees of Machu-Pichu restaurant were tossing raw chicken legs up on the roof for it. This went on for some time before the eagle disappeared. Eventually the bird was found on the ground in poor health, was caught and delivered to a rehabilitation center where it recovered and was subsequently released in upstate New York.

In 2012 and 2013, there was a rash of Eagle sightings on Long Island. According to the regional survey records in "Kingbird", the New York State Ornithological Ass'n quarterly magazine, there were 19 sightings on Long Island, and a nesting record in Wertheim National Wildlife Refuge in this time period. In addition, twice in 2013 mature Bald Eagles were spotted carrying nesting branches in the vicinity of Mill Neck! An exciting development!

WINDY DAY

This is a boisterous wind; it won't let up at all.
It seems determined to bring the Arctic down to me.
My eyes drip tears, my nose runs and my ears ache.

I see a solid ball of starlings, swirling in the air:
That means a hawk's around ! I watch and wait.
I'm told those birds can make their flock so dense
a hawk could break his neck attacking them.

A Redtail Hawk goes soaring by.
So he's the reason for their strategy!
Suddenly the starlings disappear.
The sky's an empty playing field.

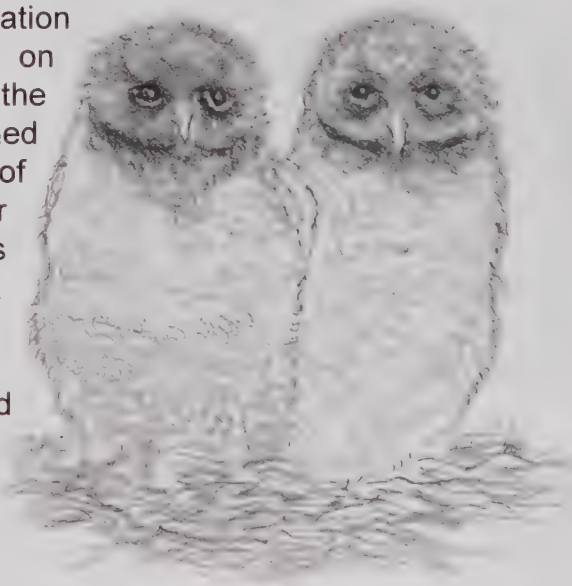
"Now watch", the Redtail says to me,
"And see the force that moves my life;
fly with me in the rushing wind
until you feel an unexpected strength
pervade your feeble self!"

He rides the roaring wind with ease
and shows me grace that lifts me up
until I thrill at the force I feel -
I think God's hugging me in the howling wind.
And I rejoice that I'm alive!

OWLS

Another large predatory bird in residence on Long Island is the Great Horned Owl. Powerful birds of prey, they are more often heard than seen. Their muffled and cadenced " Hoo, Hoo-Hoo-Hoo, Hoo-Hoo-Hoo, Hoo" is most often heard in their winter courtship months, December and January. Occasionally they are discovered in their day time roosting spots by alert Bluejays which gang up on their owl enemy and screech with real intensity. They will not give up and leave him in peace so the owl has to take off and fly till he can find another hiding spot.

Though Great Horned Owls seem to most of us to be rather remote and rare, they have accommodated well to our built-up landscape. And I found out a significant reason for that when Betty Lotowycz (of Planting Fields Arboretum) and I were helping Otto Heck doing some fact-gathering for his doctoral thesis on Great Horned Owls many years ago. Having moved to Pennsylvania- New Jersey border to live, he was interested in comparing the Great Horned Owl population there, subsisting mainly on Ruffed Grouse, with the population of Great Horned Owls on the north shore of Long Island in a similar number of acres. This turned out to be the area from Roslyn Harbor to Cold Spring Harbor, and from 25 A to Long Island Sound. Within this area, Otto located the nesting sites of 13 Great Horned Owl pairs.



Betty and I were assigned to collect the pellets (owls regurgitate the hide and bones of what they eat in neat, clean pellets which are found beneath the tree where they sit to feed) and mail then carefully to Otto in New Jersey. His job then was to dissect them

and analyze the owls' diet in great detail, down to the actual species of bird or rodent.

What he discovered was that the population of owls in N.J. was cyclic, depending on the up and down cycles of the Ruffed Grouse population there but the population numbers on Long Island remained steady because their food there was not cyclic but always available. What was that food? A large percentage of it was Norway Rat! 12 of the 13 Great Horned Owl families on the Long Island acreage lived within one mile of the seashore. He knew that these owls will travel as much as a mile for food and that Norway rats come out at night and scrounge the tide wrack for food. This was most likely the steady food supply they used, augmented by garbage and stable rats and mice and an occasional bird or two – all identified by his study of the bones in the pellets.

Most of us are aware of the presence of these owls by hearing their hooting from time to time, usually during winter courtship but occasionally in summer as well. Their deep rhythmic hooting is unique. I have heard that spell-binding sound in Brookville, where I used to live, in Shu Swamp, in Muttontown Preserve and from my house on Beaver Lake. In fact, I woke at 4 A.M. on July 21st of 2012, swatting at a mosquito buzzing at my right ear. I swatted at him 4 times before I said to myself, "Hey! Mosquitoes don't buzz in rhythmic phrases!" I freed up the other ear and then clearly heard an owl hooting right outside my window!

Hearing an owl so close by was a first but so was the ornithological baptism I received as a gift from a Great Horned Owl one late fall day not far away! I had been birding at Planting Fields Arboretum and was returning to my car. As I rounded a big Hickory at the end of the parking lot, I was surprised to see a Great Horned Owl fly out of it. Startled, it ejected three great streams of white poop. One of them splatted on the pavement beside me. The other two landed on my head! In an unbelievably fortunate stroke of good luck, I had a hair appointment scheduled for that afternoon!

The owl we more frequently encounter is the little 6" Screech Owl. (Though why its title refers to its voice being a screech when

instead it is a soft quavering whinny mystifies me!) Helen McClure was leading an Audubon walk in Shu Swamp in January of 2008. To her delight, they happened on three baby Screech Owls sitting in a row on a Red Maple branch. No one ever forgot that Audubon walk!

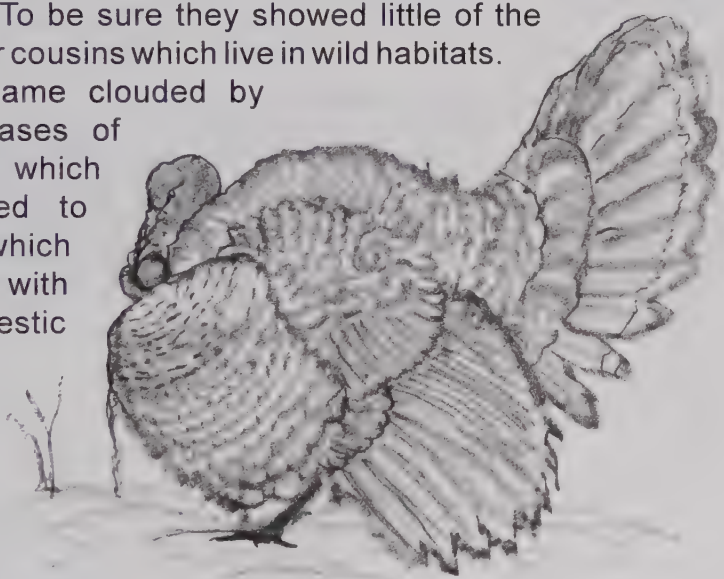
Screech Owls are sometimes found using a Wood Duck box for shelter in the winter season - (an off-season rental you might say?) We have a Wood Duck box out in the water in front of our house and have seen a rusty brown Screech Owl sunning himself in the doorway on an especially cold winter day more than once. We even saw a grey phase Screech Owl there one winter though grey ones are rather uncommon here.

A problem occurred one winter when a Screech Owl had been using that Wood Duck box. When spring came, a returning Wood Duck hen flew to the box to set up housekeeping. Flying to the doorway she recoiled in horror and would not enter the box. Eventually we canoed out to the box to find out why. The reason was that there were some rabbit bones lying in the bottom of the box where a Screech Owl had been enjoying a peaceful repast one day the previous winter. But even when the box was cleaned out, no duck would use it. We had to replace that box with a new one, moved to a slightly different location, before we had another Wood Duck tenant!

Another time when an owl surprised us was a January afternoon in 1997. My friend Keiko was leaving my house at 5 P.M. and there was a Screech Owl sitting on her car which was parked pretty close to an active bird feeder. As we emerged, we spooked the owl and it flew into an incredibly narrow slit in the nearby maple, carrying a tiny mouse which it must have caught scarfing up spilled bird seed! And that was a clear demonstration that we humans set up more than one ecosystem at our bird feeders! We feed songbirds an assortment of seed by day and when the local rodents avail themselves of spilled grain in the dark of the night, they feed the owls (and foxes too) of the neighborhood.

TURKEYS

When I was growing up before World War 2, the idea of wild Turkeys on Long Island was preposterous! Gradually, in the seventies and eighties, news came that wild Turkeys were being shipped from Pennsylvania into New York and New England for restocking purposes and their populations were spreading like wildfire. Eventually we heard of transplants of Turkeys in Connetquot State Park and other Long Island preserves. And by the 1980s we were bumping into wild Turkeys on Fire Island, Connetquot, Heckscher, and in Montauk. People in Nassau were reporting them at their feeders and seeing small flocks cross the roads. But the familiar remark was, "They're not wild. They're tame!" To be sure they showed little of the wariness of their cousins which live in wild habitats. The issue became clouded by the many releases of wild Turkeys which were acclimated to people and which were confused with the similar domestic Turkey. The signal detail by which to separate Wild from domestic Turkeys is the band on the end of the tail. This band is white on domestic Turkeys and chestnut on wild Turkeys.



Therefore, when 2 hens with four young ones took up residence near Shu Swamp in 2009 and nonchalantly strolled across the road in front of my car, I studied their tail ends with great care. To me those tail ends were a sort of beige which I guess is probably a sign of hybridization. Whatever they are, they are a welcome addition to our avifauna!

In 2009, there were such large numbers of them in Suffolk County that a brief hunting season on Turkey was set up by the D.E.C. for the month of November. And it was during this period that I saw an almost unbelievable sight from my car in Oyster Bay. There is a Hess station there, at the busy intersection of Rte.106 and Berry Hill Road. Heading for East Norwich, I passed it and then did a double take but couldn't stop in the traffic to verify what I had seen. There, in the middle of cars and trucks coming and going to get their gas at the Hess station stood a Turkey gobbler and four hens. They stood quietly while cars came and went. People filled up their cars and trucks and nobody seemed to react at all. I was relieved when I learned that our postal clerk had seen the same thing the same day! Because this was the month when Suffolk County had opened a season on Turkeys, Suffolk was a bad place for Turkeys to be. While Oyster Bay is a few miles west of the Suffolk border, it looked for all the world as if that canny gobbler figured out that, not only would his flock be relatively safe with him in Nassau County, but an added factor might be that nobody would fire a gun in a gas station for fear of blowing up the place! Benjamin Franklin always wanted to make the turkey our national bird because of its sagacity. Too bad he wasn't around to see the flock in the Hess gas station that day.

EGRETS , OTHER HERONS, CORMORANTS AND SHOREBIRDS

EGRETS

My home on Beaver Lake is on the east side of the lake, near the south corner. Directly across the lake to the west from me is Bird Roost Preserve, the edge of a woods which Egrets and Cormorants use as a night roost in the spring, summer and fall. Most eye-catching are the Great Egrets which stand over three feet tall, as opposed to Snowy Egrets which are less than two feet tall. However, Double-crested Cormorants rule the roost in numbers. Being black, they are difficult to count in the dense tree foliage but their numbers can increase to 200 or more in the early fall.

In 2013, I arrived home from a trip late in the day of April 2nd and the next morning at breakfast was startled to see a lot of something white in the trees over in the roost near the Osprey platform. Outraged to think that someone had been trashing Bird Roost Preserve, I grabbed my binoculars and found that it was just 22 Great Egrets, already there! A welcome sight! I enjoy keeping a count of the number of birds in the roost throughout the summer. The most visible are the Great Egrets and they roost low in the trees behind the Osprey nest. Later in the summer, some Snowy Egrets appear and take the lowest bushes, right at the water's edge. Meanwhile the Cormorants take the tops of the Red Maples and Tupelos. Interestingly, the majority of all the roosting birds occupy the trees right behind the ospreys' nesting pole. It's almost as if they seek each other's company. Another reason may be that there is safety in a multiple warning system if a predator is in the area.

The numbers of Great Egrets fluctuate throughout the summer. A roost is a sleeping place and not a rookery or nesting place so we're seeing basically non-breeding birds, but when the numbers grow in the late summer, some of the additions may be dispersed breeding birds from the south shore. By the first of September, the number of Great Egrets may be over fifty in the roost compared to a handful of Snowies. In contrast, the number of Cormorants up above them may be 200 or more.

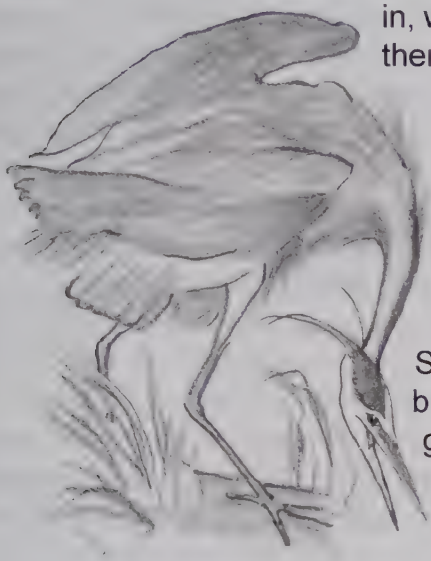
An odd fact is that all the Egrets roost facing into the woods and all the Cormorants roost facing out! Why? The first thing you'd guess would be that the Egrets are facing in to keep a wary eye out for predators like owls or raccoons in the trees If so, the same predators are enemies of the Cormorants so why do they face out? The puzzle remains. But the charm of those snow-white oval backs all evenly spaced remains, despite the fact that each bird facing in must give a definite twist to depart in flight. Every year the great hope is that some of the Egrets will stay here late enough in the fall to be included in the Audubon Christmas Count. (Egrets begin to fly south from Long Island for the winter from mid-September on.) On December 9 in 2005, there were 4 Egrets still in the roost despite a wintry temperature of 15 degrees. On Dec. 18th there were 5. On Dec. 23rd there were still 2 and they made the Christmas Count! And there were actually 4 still with us on Dec. 30th, but a storm on the 31st swept them out and they were gone for the year. That was a year when a good number of the big white birds had been present in the summer – a maximum of 65 Great Egrets were roosting here in September along with14 Snowies.

Great Blue Herons are occasional visitors but do not join the egrets in the roost, probably because Squirt, the male Osprey, takes exception to their presence. A number of times I have seen him dive down on a Great Blue flying across the lake and drive it, squawking, into the water! One reason for such animosity can be is that the heron represents a rival for the fish supply the Osprey needs to feed his young but it hardly seems that a Great Blue can make that big a dent in the fish population. However, Great Blues have also been known to take prey as big as a muskrat – the Ospreys may have heard about that and are acting to protect their young. Actually I think Squirt's attack also impresses his wife and the kids.

OTHER HERONS

Less visible members of the Heron family appear from time to time. Black-crowned Night Herons and Green Herons frequent the pond edges but are skilled at remaining inconspicuous. However one day I saw a Black-crowned walk up to a Juniper bush in my lawn at the edge of the lake, crawl under it and lie down like a puppy dog for a nap!

The skulkiest of all herons is the American Bittern. My husband and I were lucky enough to see one come in for a landing in Shu Swamp on a September day in 1998. That bird immediately froze with his bill in the air so his brown mottled pattern blending in with the reeds he landed in. If we hadn't seen him fly in, we wouldn't have noticed that he was there!



A rarity on the north shore is the Glossy Ibis. One flew by me in August of 1987 as I was walking to Shu Swamp and another, perhaps the same one, was seen on the tidal mudflats of Mill Neck Creek in September of that year. This is an all-brown southern heron with a purplish gloss and a decurved bill. It looks black in flight, has a stiff wing-stroke and frequents the coast of the south shore in the summer.

Occasionally there is an event that pulls all local herons and egrets out of hiding and that is a feeding frenzy like the one that occurred in July of 1991 at the Beaver Dam Spillway: A sudden flush of minnows in the salt water just below the water falling from the spillway, possibly being driven there by Bluefish, drew 30 Great Egrets, 20 Snowy Egrets, 7 Great Blue Herons, 4 Black-crowned Night Herons, 60 Laughing Gulls, 20 Common Terns and a number of Cormorants. What a commotion and what a bonanza!

CORMORANTS

Squirt may make a pass at a Great Blue or a Great Egret but he regularly vents his spleen on the Cormorants. Almost every evening when there are chicks in the Osprey nest, Squirt comes home, usually with fish for the babies which he dutifully delivers. Then he takes flight and powers along the face of the woods where the Cormorants have been settling in for the night with his feet extended as he flies. I know what he is doing if I am in the kitchen making supper because I hear the groans of protest being emitted by the Cormorants. Occasionally

a young Cormorant in the roost gets unnerved and drops from his perch into the water. Aha! Then Squirt has him where he wants him! He turns and power dives on the young Cormorant which submerges to avoid those talons. When Squirt ends his swoop, he turns and dives again at the Cormorant which has come up for a breath, so the Cormorant then has to dive again. The diving and ducking goes on in a rocking rhythm until Squirt gets tired of it. He usually quits after 10 or 12 dives but I once counted 40, and that was from Necklace!

Actually I think the whole act is a macho exercise for Squirt. It probably makes him feel good and it really impresses the wife and kids but if he actually caught a cormorant, I don't think he'd know what to do with it since Ospreys are fish-eaters!

Cormorants make me laugh – they are always zipping back and forth over the lake like arrows before they make up their minds about which tree they're going to roost in that night. After many passes, when they've finally decided, it's a straight shot to the chosen tree where they land with a dramatic flourish. All is not peaceful yet – there may be a number of arguments about whose tree it is and subsequent rearrangements before they settle for the night. And so ends their day.

But there is one game they play which is the best of all. I call it a "fish-along" and it happens in October just before the Cormorants leave for the south. I can tell it's in process because I hear the splashing from inside the house and I run to the porch to watch. There must be enormous schools of minnows at this time of year in the lake. What greets the eye is a tight pack of cormorants, herding fish, diving for fish, popping up with fish in their beaks. The ones in the rear constantly fly to the front in a rush to keep up with the fish. In addition, gulls hear the splashing and fly in, flanking the pack to pick up whatever fish escape to the side. The first time I saw this, I estimated there might be 30 or 40 cormorants in the group. That pack continued their drive till the railroad embankment brought them up short and the event ended. At that point they turned to fly out. To my astonishment, I counted them and there were 146! These "fish-alongs" occur maybe half a dozen times in October. And then it's time for the Cormorants to fly south. To see it again I have to wait till next year!

SHOREBIRDS

Those who keep an eye on the lake have noted little mud islands that appear in the lake, usually in August, and disappear in November. They are often crowded with Cormorants and shorebirds such as Greater Yellowlegs, Red Knots, Least and Semipalmated Sandpipers and Dunlin, waiting out the change of tide. How can islands appear and disappear? A good guess that Ralph Cioffi made is that they might be composed of marsh mud which has air bubbles in it, causing the mud to rise in hot weather when the bubbles expand and subside in cold weather when they shrink. Shorebirds find them handy and useful when they need to wait for a high tide to ebb in Mill Neck Creek so that a muddy edge for foraging will be revealed.

The north shore is not as rewarding as the south shore for seeing shorebirds; there is one thrilling view of shorebirds that I have never seen on the north shore. In April of 2012, on a trip to the West End of Jones Beach, Catarina and I walked along the inlet, heading for the ocean. A Common Loon was far out in the inlet and a pair of Red-throated Loons were fishing in a sheltered spot nearby. As we walked out along the breakwater, 7 Oystercatchers and 8 Black-bellied Plovers were resting there. They were lovely to see. But what caught our eyes and hearts was an enormous flock of Dunlin (a small shorebird), flying tightly together in great loops and swirls over the ocean. The birds would rest on the sand occasionally, in a flock so compressed and neat you could have drawn a tight line around it. Then they would take off again, their numbers remaining just as compact, and execute the sweeping dips and soaring turns that made tears come to your eyes. There was never a bird out of line, never a fault in the rhythm, and the speed at which they flew took your breath away. There were 4-5000 birds in that flock, swinging in the sky in the movements of a dance of impeccable choreography.

I cherish the memory of that Dance of the Dunlin.

WHERE DO ALL THE SHOREBIRDS DIE?

Where do all the shorebirds die?
I've never found a dead one, entombed in sand or
floating on the sea.
They are birds of airy space, so full of life, so fired with
an elemental zest!
Swift tracers of wave-action in the sky,
they fly in rhythmic flocks
at speed that takes your breath away.

How can they vanish without a trace?
There are no burial sites to mark their bones.
Perhaps it's fitting to be lacking them
as graves would only hold
the wind-birds still against their will.

I think I know what must occur
when a shorebird starts to die:
In flight a single feather falls, and then two more,
then more and more are strewn in air
as velocity increases and the flock is left behind,
so that when every feather's shed
there's nothing left at all
but sparks of fire
traveling toward the stars.

BLUEBIRDS AND INDIGO BUNTINGS

Who can not be uplifted by the sight of a male Bluebird in the morning sun in spring, the bird that "has brushed the sky with his back"? Not only is his back that intense sky blue, but his breast is vividly painted with rusty red, and his demeanor is gentle, just like his song. Many of us have welcomed spring in past years by the sight of the first Bluebird.

But, alas, that has rarely been the case on Long Island in recent years. Bluebirds like the association of pastures and apple orchards and edges of fields and these habitats have been diminishing in the years since World War II. But in 1992, Bluebirds in our area got a great boost from a naturalist, son of the Presbyterian minister in Glen Cove, who thought he could do something to help them. His name was David Allan and he knew Bluebirds were losing nesting holes in trees to aggressive birds like Starlings and House Sparrows, so he scrounged around for weathered boards and made about 60 boxes according to Audubon specifications. These he placed in suitable locations in Nature Conservancy properties and other natural areas, and, with permission, he placed six of them in the shaggy old horse show grounds in Piping Rock Club in 1994.

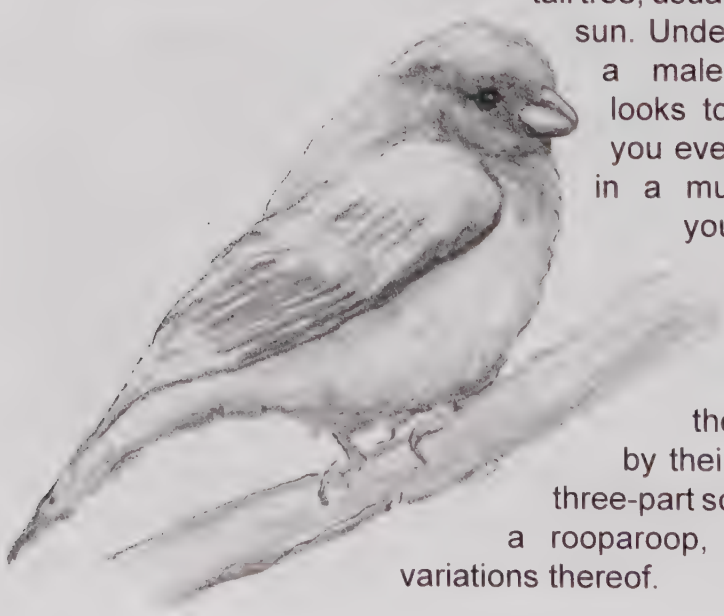
The result was that a total of eighteen young Bluebirds were fledged from those boxes! (The number seems high but Bluebirds often raise two or even three broods in one season when conditions are right.) This total was achieved despite the fact that House Wrens (which we had not worried about!) raided two of those boxes, punctured the eggs with their bills, and dropped them on the ground. The wretches didn't eat them and didn't take the boxes for their own nesting! The end result however was that the Wrens then got busy with their own domiciles and the Bluebirds got to nest late and raise their own families, foregoing any chance to raise a second clutch..

A few years later, while walking in the old horse show grounds at Piping Rock in July, I was admiring an adult Rose-breasted Grosbeak with a baby alongside and a male Towhee with a baby

Towhee, when I saw a pair of Bluebirds feeding two young in an oak tree. Later that year, there were five Bluebirds recorded on the Christmas Count (which is in late December), and seven or eight more in the trees at Margie von Stade's house on the back road at Piping Rock. Bluebirds can winter over if there is an ample supply of seeds and berries. I remember some years ago seeing a small flock of Bluebirds on a snowy day feeding on red Sumac berries in the morning sun at Caumsett State Park, a lovely sight. Cold temperatures they can tolerate as long as there is a good nourishing food supply.

Piping Rock Club, enthused by the success of David's boxes then put up some more out on the golf course, bringing the total number of boxes to fifteen. By 2006, those fifteen boxes were producing an average of thirty young Bluebirds a year which pleased David though he had by then moved away and could no longer monitor them. David had checked the boxes regularly to make sure there were no intruder's eggs in them, only the usual four to five Bluebird eggs. I remember the surprise and delight one day when he discovered six Bluebird eggs in one box!

A male Indigo Bunting is a bird that is even bluer than a Bluebird – it is totally blue all over. The reason we don't see them frequently is because their habit is to sing their unique love song from the top of a tall tree, usually right against the sun. Under those conditions a male Indigo Bunting looks totally black! But if you ever see one bathing in a mud puddle before you, in full sun, you'll be blown away by the intensity of that blue! You can know they are in the area by their distinctive reedy, three-part song: "A reapareap, a rooparoop, a reapareap" or variations thereof.



I feel lucky any year I see a male in its spring blue! More often I see Indigo Buntings in August or September in weedy, grassy places, feeding on seeds along with sparrows, finches and other birds as they begin their migration south. At that time, though one might be lucky enough to see a male that hasn't changed into winter plumage yet, they are usually café-au-lait in color with a grey bill which is slightly larger in proportion than a Sparrow's. Café-au-Lait is the female's all-year plumage which the male assumes in winter. Some young males may have a hint of blue on the tail or wings.

I thought I had spotted a breeding pair in the old stabling area near the horse show grounds in Piping Rock one spring. There was a big blown-down Cherry tree which still had its green leaves at the edge of the woods. A male was singing around that tree and once I saw the female slip into it. I've read that the nest of an Indigo Bunting is notoriously hard to find. The female is exceptionally covert about approaching or leaving it on a long well-hidden route. Rather than risk disturbing them, I left them to their sneaky selves and never found out for sure if they brought off young in that Cherry tree. However in July of a later year, I did see a pair of Indigo Buntings feeding young in the weeds of the stabling area and that made a happy addition to the breeding bird census of the area.

Bluejays are a gorgeous blue too and we enjoy seeing them at our feeders (except when they make pigs of themselves!) but Bluebirds and Buntings are exquisite and lift the heart, especially when singing in the sun.

CAROLINA WRENS

Carolina Wrens are among southern species that have moved up to Long Island in the second half of the last century. I never saw Carolina Wrens around the time of the Second World War, nor was I familiar with the Cardinal, the Glossy Ibis, the Snowy Egret , the Great Egret, the Tufted Titmouse, the Red-bellied Woodpecker or the Mockingbird. The incursion of these species was before any talk of a warming climate. In fact we had some bitter winters and heavy snow in the sixties and seventies. There were a couple of years when the Carolina Wrens around our house disappeared after especially cold winters with heavy

snow and I can remember the delight I felt when I once again heard that loud cheerful song in the bushes.

Carolina Wrens are more robust than House Wrens. They are larger, have bright bay sides, a bold white eye-stripe and a loud rollicking song. They have also figured out how to stay alive during most of our winters and are not shy about singing in a snowclad land. They are also fearless about nesting in a great variety of places made available by people such as: under the lid of the propane tank, in amongst flower pots on the shelf in the garage, in one of a homeowner's straw hats hanging in the garage, and in a hanging geranium on someone's porch. This last location was on our porch and caused some consternation when I had to water the plant and not wet the nestlings. Three nestlings emerged intact from that nest on the 10th of July that year. One of them launched himself on his first flight, then did a U-turn when he suddenly saw my husband, and flew smack into the porch post! My husband looked for him in bushes below but he had survived the crash and flew with his siblings at five o'clock that afternoon. We looked out our bedroom window later that evening and saw three fuzzy heads sticking out of the Yew bush outside. Those Wrens called till dark and the next morning were off and gone.

More than one Carolina Wren has adopted one of my hanging plants for a night-time roost as well as well as a nesting place and if I linger too long on the porch in the evening, it will blast me with a vigorous scolding because I am being careless about observing bedtime!

Another time I was careless about bedtime when the wrens were having a second nesting in one of the hats on the garage wall. I was out late and had left the lights on in the garage. The babies thought it was still day and were twittering and begging in the nest until I hastily turned off the lights on them and their harried parents at 11 P.M.!

A word about other wrens in the area: House Wrens are the bubbly little fellows that occupy the bird houses we put out and are welcome insect-eaters in every garden; Winter Wrens are the tiniest of the clan and are sometimes found hiding in a big pile of brush in the woods in winter – they possess the loudest, longest and most varied of all wren songs but seldom treat us to it in winter; and Long-billed Marsh Wrens which nest in marsh reeds on the edge of salt water where their tinkling song emanates like drops of falling water.

MAY MORNING

They ought to bottle May mornings!
I mean the sunrise and the dew,
leaf-freshness and the smell of loam
that swims in night-cool air
and washes down the violets;
The cheer of strident robins,
goldfinch chuckle and the whisper of a warbler
traveling to cooler woods.

I'd keep a bottle on the shelf
and, winter-hearted, take off the top to pour it on my head, immerse
myself in fragrant air
and sunlit budding peace.

But no, I know it wouldn't work.
May mornings are lovely gifts for spring alone.
Life teaches me that frozen times must also be,
the winter of the soul.
Hope must be slowly grown beneath a ground
that shows no sign of life at all.

We need to hold our disbelief
when experience says, "Remember,"
to the heart, a burnt-out ember,
and through the cold in stoic patience wait until
the seed has gone through death and brought forth life.
Then in wonder we can touch the blade
That struggles through a softened ground
To meet the morning sun in May.

BLUE-GRAY GNATCATCHERS

I never saw a Gnatcatcher when I was growing up. In fact I don't think I knew there was such a thing until I began birding more heavily in the 1970s and 80s. They are such tiny little mites – they have a body smaller than a chickadee and a disproportionately long tail which they flick frequently. Like a miniature mockingbird, without much song, they come north with flocks of warblers in the spring, issuing their call note, "Pssst", as they zip around the trees.

John Bull's book "Birds of the New York Area", published in 1964, states that it was known to breed in a few places in New Jersey but unknown on Long Island. However, it was part of that incursion of southern species in the middle of the last century though they first appeared in relatively small numbers. Therefore it was an exciting discovery to find a pair nesting in Shu Swamp in May of 2000! A birder from Bayville spotted the nest and showed it to me. He had seen one of the birds carrying cattail fluff to the nest site on a horizontal oak branch. When completed, the nest was festooned with lichens and spiderwebs and looked like a protruding knob on the branch. And what a location! There was a dead snag arching over it like a roof, giving the family privacy and protecting them from predators and storms as well.

On May 28th, I took a zoom scope into the woods and found the sun on the nest in the early morning. I watched the parents buzz around and feed four tiny young in the nest for nearly an hour. Eight needle-like bills stuck straight up and gobbled every

bit of food that was brought. The mother brought inchworms and tiny bugs while the father brought thick green caterpillars which he had to beat into submission before feeding them to the little ones.

The mother also brooded the young for a bit. As she sat, she reached down the sides of the nest to the babies occasionally and brought up tiny flecks of something in her bill. The father brought several food items to her which she passed down to the babies under her. On June 4th, those babies were still crowded into that nest but the next day they were gone.

However, when I was checking the site on June 18th, I was surprised to see that the nest was only half its original size. We hadn't had any big storms and, while I was puzzling about it, a Gnatcatcher appeared, tore off a small chunk of the nest and flew off with it. On researching Gnatcatchers later, I learned that they frequently take nesting material from an old nest to use in a new one. However, though we saw them fly high into a Tupelo with mouthfuls of nesting materials, none of us could locate the second nest. This time they had hidden it in thick Tupelo leaves thirty feet up in the air!

The following year, the Gnatcatchers were back on April 28th and built a nest high in a Red Maple which was quickly obscured by foliage. Alas they have not nested here since.

I think Blue-gray Gnatcatchers have a fondness for Shu Swamp because in May of 2009, a group of us remarked on the presence of a Redtail Hawk, not far into the woods near the parking area. Then we were amazed to see that the hawk was being bombed by a tiny but very fierce Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. In a few minutes, the Redtail respectfully took off. So we hoped the Gnatcatcher might be thinking of nesting again – and still keep hoping. They are amazing little birds!

THE PROTHONOTARY WARBLER

The Prothonotary Warbler is one of the most breathtakingly beautiful of the warbler clan!

Suffused in bright yellow over its head, neck and breast, (even orange at times!), the male has blue-gray wings, rump and tail and an olive-green back. The female is a duller version of the same colors. There are no wing-bars or eye-rings to distract you. In addition to its brilliance, it has a strong and memorable song: all on one pitch: "Zweet-zweet-zweet-zweet-zweet ", and in its southern habitat, is usually seen against black swamp waters, a stunning sight!

Imagine my surprise when I heard that unmistakable song right outside my office window on May 14th, 2001. I barreled out of the house with my binoculars, and there it was, a gorgeous male Prothonotary Warbler, trying to evict a House Wren from its nest box hanging from a low branch of the Kwanzan Cherry tree on the edge of the lake. When I read up on the bird, I found that it is the only eastern warbler that nests in a cavity and it is particularly fond of shrubs and trees near water for its nesting location. And here was a perfect nesting site right next to water! There ensued a battle for ownership of that box: the warbler would pull the wren's nesting material out of the box, dump it on the ground and put in his own choice of material. Subsequently, the wren would pull that out and replace it with his own. Then the warbler would switch the nesting material again. And the wren would replace it with his own.

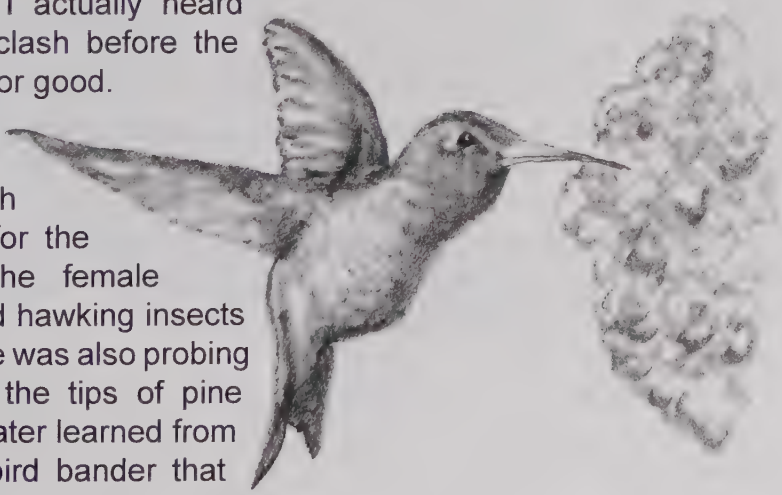
The competition was so great that I went down to Nobman's Hardware in Oyster Bay right away and bought the last wren house they had – an elegant bentwood affair with a porch. I hung it on the edge of the woods and that finally satisfied the House Wrens. They moved in and peace reigned in the garden by the water. However, though that Prothonotary sang lustily for three weeks, no female showed up and that was the end of a magnificent effort. Each year I look and listen, but that beautiful stranger from the south never showed up again.

HUMMINGBIRDS

In May of 1998, my husband and I decided we'd like to see if there were some Hummingbirds in our garden. So we drove down to Glen Cove and picked up a couple of red and purple Fuchsias in pots. I hung them up in our open porch and within 24 hrs. there was a male Ruby-throated Hummingbird at one of the Fuchsias enthusiastically nectaring on the drooping red flowers! Thus encouraged, we quickly added a Hummingbird feeder full of sugar water (4:1) nearby. There happened to be a thermometer hanging on the post nearby and the Hummingbird took a long look at the red bulb on the thermometer before he imbibed at the feeder.

He then nectared at that feeder pretty constantly until Aug.17th when a female got up the nerve to join him. (Male Hummingbirds are definitely dominant at our feeder.) She had been feeding at some Cardinal Flower blooms on our driveway and in early August I had seen a disheveled baby hummer near the Cardinal Flower. It was sporting tufts of down on its sides, had a rumpled-looking head and showed just a bit of metallic green on its back.

I guess its mother had earned a trip to the nectar feeder. She was feeding there when another adult female zoomed in and was promptly run out of town by the resident mother. Undeterred, the stranger female came back and had such a fight with resident female that I actually heard their wings clash before the intruder left for good.



It was in that month that I saw, for the first time, the female Hummingbird hawking insects in the air. She was also probing for them at the tips of pine branches. I later learned from a Hummingbird bander that 40% of a hummingbird's diet

is insect matter. The adults need the protein for their own good but they also feed their babies almost totally on insects to provide protein for the development of their young bodies.

Three years later, in late September, I watched a female Hummingbird, (whom I had named Amy for no particular reason) tank up at the sugar-water feeder one day. She didn't move when I came out on the porch. I watched her sipping steadily for as much as a minute at a time without any wing-fluttering. In the 10 or 15 minutes while I was watching her, she extended her tongue two or three times, piddled half a dozen times and continued to guzzle on and off all morning. The next day I looked for her but she had left on her long flight to the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico, en route to her winter home. This trip would include a 500-mile nonstop flight over the Gulf of Mexico, a staggering feat. I prayed she would make it.

That huge flight over water is really almost incredible. Research says that Hummingbirds in their nesting habitats need to nectar about every fifteen minutes to have the energy to keep up their phenomenal wing-beats. Their food is also 40% insects but how can they imbibe enough food to fly five hundred miles non-stop over the Gulf of Mexico? It seems impossible, yet those half-ounce birds do it every year. That puts you in awe of the miracle of creation, doesn't it?

One year, the two males which had dominated our feeder all summer long left in late August which gave Amy, the female a chance to feed in peace. She would at times hover in front of my face for a moment, repeatedly, until I understood what she was telling me: the feeder needed refilling. She even came out in the garden and hovered before my face for the same reason.

Sometimes she hovered right in front of my eyes, looking straight at me. Her tiny black eyes seemed to look right through me – it was a mesmerizing experience.

In late September, she went to the feeder, took long sips of 9 or 10 seconds each, and did that several times. The year before she had done the same thing, so I knew she must be tanking up to leave and, sure enough, the next day she was gone.

TO A HUMMINGBIRD

She looked at me.
No, it was not just that –
Her eyes met mine one day and the power
of that brief glance
riveted my soul.

She was a little female hummingbird,
hovering before my face.
I felt the wind of her vibrant wings,
I met the blackness of her piercing eyes.

Her intensive look skewered my very heart.
She knew me.
She knew me better than I know myself.
That tiny bit of life transfixed the whole of me.

Since that day, she has often come quite close to me.
Yesterday she hovered nearer than before,
just inches from my eyes
and held my heart for many beats.
She said, "It's time to go – I came to say good-bye."

Six years we have been connected.
(How long can a hummingbird live?)
I know that as she flies a thousand miles to Mexico this month.
and struggles to cross five hundred miles of Gulf nonstop,

She'll have a part of me inside of her
that she withdrew from me in her intensity;
and if she can't return next spring,
I will hold the magic of her being
forever in my heart.

THE DUMP

Sometimes the most unlikely places yield amazing surprises! One of those places, fortunately close at hand, is the dump at Piping Rock Club. This is not a dump for garbage or household trash. This is where they put excess leaves, branches, grass cuttings and dirt. The result of many years of such dumping is huge heaps of organic soil covered with luxuriant weeds. These weeds bear flowers and seeds in late summer and fall and become a bonanza of a feeding station for local and migrant songbirds in early fall. Insects proliferate and are food for flycatchers and warblers as well.

The greatest of the weeds is Giant Ragweed! It bears seeds that are manna to sparrows and finches. It grows to the height of a man and In addition, it is non-allergenic! Besides the Ragweed, the place is full of the dreaded exotics Mugwort and Mile-a-Minute Weed – (birds know nothing about invasives except that they taste good!) – plus Goldenrods, Horseweed, Hedge Bindweed, Dewberries, Mustards, Evening Primroses, St. Johnsworts, Joe-Pye-Weeds and Asters.

In addition to the food supply, water is usually available at the Piping Rock dump. At one time there was a good-sized puddle under overhanging weeds where small birds felt safe. That hidden source of water got bulldozed but since then there have been long-lasting puddles on the compacted soil.

This dump is also a peaceful place for birds to rest and feed because it is removed from main traffic patterns and disturbed only by occasional dumpings of fresh material. In addition it is surrounded by woods which provide shelter, nighttime roosts and protection from windstorms.

So how could there be a better place to see birds during fall migration? I only wish I had discovered the spot years before I did! Not only do we see the expected species, filtering through from Canada and New England on their way south, but sometimes there

is something uncommon or rare in amongst the multitudes that is an occasion of great excitement like the bird that showed up for the Christmas Count in 2011.

My assignment for the Christmas count is always the Piping Rock Club which basically is so well-groomed that it is not expected to harbor anything spectacular for the Count. Having discovered the Dump, naturally I and Annie Lotowycz, my helper, the young birder who has better eyes and ears than I have, headed for the Dump. And there we were, checking off the species and their numbers when I heard her hiss, "I've never seen anything like it!" I swung my binoculars up to eye-level on the heap we were perusing, and there, in the morning sunshine, broadside to us, was a small bright green bird. I mean as green as a parrot! About the size of a Whitethroat Sparrow, it was quietly feeding with them and other sparrows on the weedy heap.

We didn't know what it was. There are no bright green birds in the book except for one – a female Painted Bunting – a strictly southern species. The male Painted Bunting is often featured on the covers of bird books and articles as it is an extravagantly colored red, blue, yellow and purple bird but the female is solid green. (No wonder as she has to be invisible on her nest!)

On the night of the Christmas Count, everyone gathers at a central location in the evening to share the number of birds they have seen, species by species. And then the compiler asks for rarities which are not on the usual list. Like a Painted Bunting.

Then we had a problem. You cannot announce a rarity on a private Club property as a large number of people will want to see it so, by prearrangement, the Compiler announced that it was on private property and then quickly went on and finished the Compilation. And we all went home. But then the compiler began to get phone calls from birders anxious to add it to their lists. So we worked out a plan.

However, there was a singular problem; to get to the Dump, you have to go through the Skeet Shoot where club members are actively shooting on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays from 10:00 A.M. on. Most birders who longed to see the bird were only free

to go birding on Saturdays and Sundays. So we organized small groups of people to meet at the easy-to-find Friends Meeting House at 7A.M on Saturdays and Sundays, and led a procession of five or six cars through the club grounds arriving at the Skeet Shoot at 7:30 A.M. where we parked the cars and walked into the Dump. This gave us 2 hours to spot the bird by patiently watching the heaps of weeds where the birds were feeding before we had to leave in advance of the shooting.

We managed to do this 13 times! That blessed bird stayed right there for a month and 32 people got to see it. In addition to that, one of the birders standing in the Dump on New Year's Eve saw a woodpecker flying by and called out, "Hey! I think that's a Pileated Woodpecker!" So we all got in our cars and zipped over to the staff parking lot near the woods where the bird seemed to be heading. Because if there's one thing rarer than a Painted Bunting on Long Island, it's a Pileated Woodpecker! One had not been seen here for 11 years. We walked along the west edge of the golf course, peering into the trees, and there it was, clinging to an oak tree deep in the woods. Someone had brought a scope and all 13 people there got to see it. And that was the saga of the Christmas Count of 2011.

The year rolled around and in the summer of 2012 I decided to try the Dump at Piping Rock in the month of August, having always been sure that only in September did the migrations really begin to move. Well, what a surprise! It turns out that August is the month to see Flycatchers! On the 8th of August in 2012 there were 5 handsome Kingbirds, 2 adults and 3 young of the year, sallying forth from the dead trees on the hill. There were also 3 or 4 Phoebes, quietly feeding on the heaps.

That day, besides the flycatchers, there was a family of 6 Bluejays, 2 adult and 4 young which were chasing each other around the dead tree tops, and 4 Flickers, 2 adult and 2 young, in trees on the west edge. More Phoebes appeared two days later, and three days later, added to the Kingbirds and the Phoebes, a Great Crested Flycatcher showed up as well as two of the "Empidonax Flycatchers" which are hopeless to identify in the fall as they look alike and remain silent then.

On the 17th of August, besides 4 Kingbirds and 3 or 4 Phoebes, there was also a Wood Pewee. Four days later there was a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher and the day after that an Olive-sided Flycatcher. In addition to 6 kinds of Flycatchers, during August there were also Indigo Buntings , Cedar Waxwings, an occasional Bluebird, a large flock of more than 20 Chipping Sparrows, and on the 21st, a variety of warblers, including Worm-eating, Blue-winged, Yellow, Chestnut-sided, Yellowthroat, Redstart and a Yellow-breasted Chat! My companion that day Mary Normandia, spotted the Chat, the Worm-eating and the Blue-winged Warblers with her eagle eyes!

By September 7, there were over 100 Chipping Sparrows, 5 or 6 Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, plus a Grosbeak that had some of the characteristics of a young Black-headed Grosbeak, a western stray. More warblers were coming through in September and more sparrows were beginning to show up: a few Chipping Sparrows were still there but a Field Sparrow, a Clay-colored Sparrow and the first Whitethroat Sparrow of the season appeared.

October is the big month for sparrows: on the 11th, 2 or 3 White-crowned Sparrows were added to a small flock of half a dozen Whitethroat Sparrows and they were joined by a Lincoln's Sparrow and a Swamp Sparrow. Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned Kinglets arrived on the 13th and a House Finch joined the 6 or 7 Purple Finches that had slipped in. That day was also the first appearance of two other winter visitors: a Red-breasted Nuthatch and a Winter Wren.

The third week in October produced a number of Song Sparrows (the dark-streaked ones which are a northern population), 8 Pine Siskins, a dozen Goldfinches, a Gray-cheeked Thrush and the first Slate-colored Junco of the season. That Junco was joined by 15-20 more two days later and a Fox Sparrow was added to the list of Swamp Sparrow, Song Sparrow, Chipping Sparrow, Junco, Whitethroat Sparrow, and White-crowned Sparrow.

Little did I know that October 22, 2012 was to be the swan-song for bird-watching at the Dump that year. On October 29, 2012, the big storm Sandy hit. Well over 300 trees went down at the Piping Rock Club and during the cleanup after the storm,the dump was needed

for the enormous residue of cut-up logs and brush. Large machinery had to be employed to move stuff around and make room for load after load. The heaps of dirt and weeds were leveled and pushed out of the way, back to the woods to make room for endless truckloads of debris.

After that debacle, the Christmas Count was held on December 15th, and, as Piping Rock Club is my area to cover, I ducked in to the dump one morning in advance to have a look. In that chaos, there was not one bird – no, wait, I'm wrong - there were three Song Sparrows on a pile of logs. The place was silent.

But all was not lost. The Club is a big place and despite the fact that it is so neat and tidy that it's hard to find a large number of birds for the Christmas Count, there is one area that is a little messy – the old Horse Show Stabling area. Other than yearly mowing in the open areas, it is left pretty much alone and the Club has now declared it a "Natural Area". There are some Bluebird boxes in it, one of which was used in 2012, and some interesting birds have been seen in it at times during migration.

Therefore on the Count Day we counters headed down the back road for the Stabling area. One of the team spotted a Bluebird flying across the road heading into the stabling area. We screeched to a stop and bailed out, binoculars in hand. 4 Bluebirds were feeding in the grass there with 7 Juncos. All was not lost! Those birds flew up into an oak on the edge of the woods. Whoa! Up there with them was a saffron yellow bird – an astonishing color! It acted like a warbler, though it was on the large side for a warbler and not one of those active, flitty types. Also it had two duller birds with it, females or young. No warbler in the book is that color yellow in winter. After much discussion, we went home, grabbed all the books we could find and cell-phoned the experts who were in Shu Swamp. They joined us, we went back to the Stabling area and actually found that whole flock of birds still together not far away in the old Horse Show grounds. And the identification of the saffron-yellow bird was nailed down as being a Pine Warbler, rare in winter, which is known to occur occasionally in a very bright yellow, as opposed to its normal yellowish green. It was a bright and welcome surprise on a Christmas Count that had held little promise!

GREEN LICHEN LIGHT

The woods of pine were dark and soft
with silent duff beneath;
a pleasant soil to wander on.
Then cooled and calmed by deepest shade,
it was a spot to rest and stand in peace
away from heat and noise and glaring light.

One rainy day I hurried there,
Intent on walking to the other side,
but stopped, astonished that
there was more light beneath the pines
than I had ever seen before.
I could not find the source of light.
There were no reflected rays of sun
or beams of any other light.

I finally saw, pervading all,
a soft suffusion, a gray-green glow
from lichens on the trunks of trees.
Fat with rain, pale gatherers of every mote of light,
they emanated a softened sort of daylight by themselves.

How strange to find a dark place lightened
by an undistinguished plant
which I had known was dry and flat before.
Boggled, I was held for moments in its spell.

Does God not sometimes do the same for us?
I recalled that once or twice
when I've expected darkness to surround me
with its customary gloom
and unexpectedly

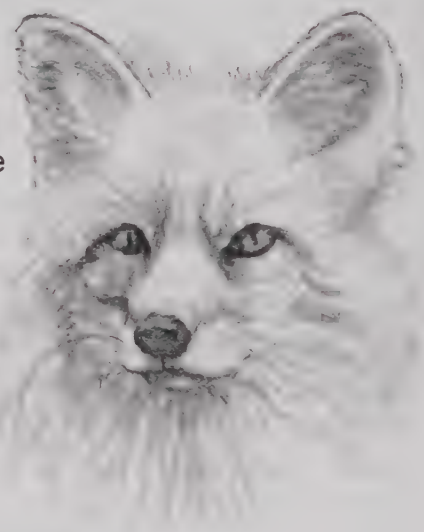
the sadness of my day was oddly lighted up
by a source of light I hadn't known about.
What I had dreaded had become illuminated
with unexpected radiance where all was gray before!

How refreshing to the heart to be surprised,
How dazzling to receive a sudden gift.
Lichen light makes
life seem full of hope and goodness after all!

MAMMALS

RED FOXES

Of all the wild mammals that live in our woods, the one that inevitably makes my heart leap when I see it is a Red Fox! I don't see them often but it is always a thrill to have a glimpse of one. I remember seeing the pachysandra along our driveway moving oddly one June afternoon in 1994. I stood very still and pretty soon a pair of red ears popped out, followed by a sharp-nosed face with bright eyes. When the little fox that owned them, saw me close by, he was suitably horrified and was gone in a flash.



Two years later in summer, I encountered a young fox in Welwyn Preserve in Glen Cove which did not seem at all perturbed by my presence and went about his occupation of trying to stalk and pounce on shrews (or mice) in the dead leaves with a total lack of success. That same year in November, my husband and I were treated to the sight of a fox trotting by our porch as the full moon was setting.

But the Christmas of 1995 was one that has stuck in my memory. We had snow that Christmas and the lake was frozen except for a big open hole in the middle (caused by the discharge of warm water during the making of ice at the Skating Club across the lake). At that time there were about 900 Canada geese spending the night around the edges of that hole.

That day there were myriads of fresh fox tracks on our place and on the snow on the lake. No doubt the foxes at night were checking the flock for an unwary or weak goose. That year our 6 yr. old granddaughter Abbey was spending Christmas with us and was fond of playing "Husky" in the snow on her hands and knees. I suggested she be a foxhound instead and follow the tracks of a fox. This she

did with alacrity and was able to follow a single track all the way across my neighbor's property to the roots of a large Red Maple up by the road. Its roots made a perfect cave and the snow before it was trampled with dozens of tracks. "Oh, Abbey", I exclaimed with delight, "You've found the foxes' den!" She stood up, surveyed it quietly, and said, "Well, we can go now." Her mother later explained to me that she had seen animals protecting their dens with vigor on television and thought we really shouldn't hang around!

A month after that I saw a fox trot across the snowy lake in broad daylight, sniffing along a trail. Every now and then he would stop, lift his head and yap. He was a handsome animal with jet black stockings and a full brush and I'm sure there was a vixen in the area!

Those were years when many people reported seeing foxes. It was a period of peak population for foxes and when that occurs to a species in the wild it is usually followed by a disease occurrence which lowers the population. With raccoons the disease is usually distemper, but with foxes it is sarcoptic mange. By May of 1997 people were reporting mangy foxes to Bob Hornosky, North Shore Wildlife Sanctuary Warden, and nature's population control was in effect. By 2001 however, I did see an adolescent fox trotting through Muttontown Preserve – a sign of recovery.

In 2003, a Red Fox was seen stalking a Black-tailed Prairie Dog (yes, a Prairie Dog!) by the Hawk Watch just east of Field 5 on Fire Island. That Prairie Dog had been in residence in the big heap of sand at the east end of the divided parkway and was a source of amusement to the volunteers who man the Fire Island Hawk Watch. It had evidently been dropped there at some point and the Parks Department, pointing out that Prairie Dogs are colonial animals, after two years, removed it to place it with other Prairie Dogs in another state!

The sequel to my observations of foxes was an embarrassing misidentification of a long-legged Fox that I made in early May of 2009. I first saw this animal outside our bedroom window, rounding the house on the grass edging the lake. He was moving along in a determined fashion, a yellowish-gray specimen, long-legged and lean with a rather poor yellowish-gray brush.. I admired his athletic

movement and referred to him as a long-legged Fox. Later that year I saw this same animal when he sprang out of the yew bushes on the edge of the porch where he had been stalking a pair of nervous Canada Geese which were grazing on the lawn. Again, as he looked over his shoulder at me and trotted away up the hill, I admired his athletic gait without stopping to think that a fox with its relatively short legs, could never move like that.

COYOTES

On June 6, 2010, Tom Hornosky, Warden of North Shore Wildlife Sanctuary received a call from a man who lived on Factory Pond Road, north of Beaver Lake. He had let his two big dogs out in his field and saw them run, terrified, up to the house. Getting binoculars, he told Tom that down in the field he saw what he thought was a Coyote. Tom assured him that he thought it was probably one of our long-legged Foxes. The man hung up but called back later to say he had walked down to where the animal had been standing in the field and there he found a disemboweled Fox. Here endeth my reports of Long-legged Foxes! It obviously was a Coyote!

WHITETAIL DEER

I'd rather switch to something that really is longer-legged and that is the Whitetail Deer. Lovely to look at but deeply resented when they have moved into our gardens. We have been accustomed to knowing that deer inhabit the east end of the Island but the time has come when they have moved into western Suffolk and Nassau Counties as well.

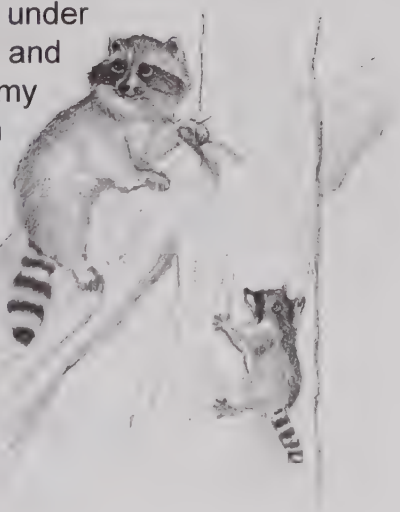
Paper delivery men have been seeing deer for some years as they are delivering papers in very early morning hours. However one mid-day in 2003, a doe with a young fawn was seen by the Warden on Old Shu Swamp Road in Shu Swamp Preserve in mid-day. In addition, that year a young buck was seen in Lattingtown and another in Mill Neck. Finally in November 2009 there was a deer track on a soft muddy trail in Muttontown Preserve. It was a large track, deeply impressed, and looked like the imprint of a heavy animal, perhaps a buck.

I knew deer were in Muttontown and in Shu Swamp but I wondered why I had never encountered one. They are big hairy animals! Nor had I ever seen a track in Shu Swamp. I made that remark to Dick Weir, a former Agricultural agent, and he asked me if I had been in Shu Swamp lately. I had. "Well, how are the Hostas doing there?" (They are garden escapes which are right at home in Shu Swamp's streams and stream banks.) I replied that actually I had noticed that the main stream seemed to have fewer Hostas in it. "Well", he said," They are candy to the deer!" Well, that explained why I was seeing no tracks – they were walking up the streams, munching Hostas as they went!

However, my luck finally changed on June 6, 2011. My daughter Cathie was visiting and it was her birthday so we decided to go for a walk in Shu Swamp. Toward the end of our walk we were discussing a rare Goldenrod (Solidago patula) that is losing ground there to invasive European Yellow Iris, when, with a huge crash, a full-grown doe lurched out of a side stream right under our noses! Cathie even got a picture of it when it stopped and peered back through the bushes at us. So she had a birthday present and I got to see a deer in Shu Swamp at last!

RACCOONS

Raccoons are another story. I'm afraid they are so much a fact of life around here that I haven't kept detailed records of them. I have heard them having screaming cat-fights at night occasionally, seen them scarfing up spilled bird seed under my feeder in the car headlights at night, and frequently picked up the contents of my recycling container in the garage when they have upended it investigating a faint smell of something or other. I do cringe at flattened fauna on the road that turns out to be another raccoon that bit the dust. I am aware of episodes of distemper at times that thinned their ranks. In addition, twice we had been notified when the D.E.C. found



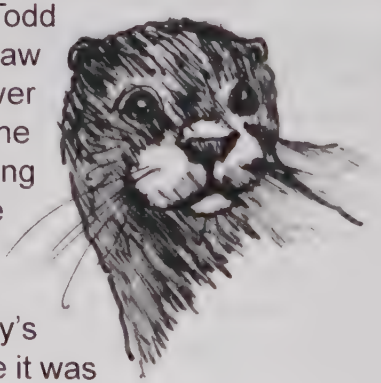
it necessary to put preventive bait out in places like Shu Swamp to immunize raccoons when rabies was detected in the area.

I do remember that once, years ago, when raccoons had inhabited the attic apartment of a vacant building in Brookville in the 1950s and that attic was subsequently refurbished for an incoming employee and his wife, the couple promptly left because the smell of raccoon urine which had impregnated the wood was intolerable. Stopgap measures did not work and it cost the owners $10,000 to reframe the whole apartment.

Once when I was asked to teach a nature course to elementary grades of a school for handicapped children, I thought it best to bring in live animals to get the kids really interested. I learned of a woman who had a tame raccoon she brought to children's groups so I arranged for her to come and visit the first and second grades with her pet. The raccoon worked fine when it was observed on a table in front of them but when she brought it around the circle to greet the individual children, there was a bit of consternation because the raccoon would greet each child by putting his paws on their knees. But raccoons have long claws and they gripped those little knees hard enough to really scare some of them. What worked better was the tame opossum that another lady brought a month later, because it just stayed, half asleep, on the table and snoofled quietly to itself. It made no quick moves and the children had a fine time drawing close and petting it. A fine lesson animal!

RIVER OTTERS

My first awareness of the presence of River Otters in Beaver Lake came on June 27th, 1987 when Todd Cole, who was living nearby, said that he saw a large animal porpoising around Beaver Lake with two young on its back. When he approached with his kayak, it made a barking noise at him. He thought it sounded like an Otter. When I reached Peter Warny (who was then surveying mammals on Long Island for the Nature Conservancy's Heritage Program), he said it was possible it was



an Otter and to look for a latrine – a big heap of bones, scales and feces made by Otters which served as a territorial sign. This put us all on the alert!

My first actual sighting of River Otters on Long Island was later the same year on November 14, 1987. That morning I walked down to the causeway at dawn and there were two young otters hunting for fish down near the spillway, where the water is deepest and the fish are plentiful. They were not more than two feet long and had caught some small fish which they were crunching vigorously. They were being harassed by a Great Blue Heron and perhaps a bit by a Mute Swan. (There were 106 Swans in the lake that day.) The otters finally took off, porpoising along as they headed for Bird Roost Point where they disappeared at the waterline. I presumed that's where their den was but found out later that otters have more than one visiting spot, referred to as "an otter latrine or a scrape, and this location is one of their favorites. The analysis of these "latrines", containing scat, and fish bones, are a giveaway to the number of Otters in an area. They will be located at the sites within their home territories where they are most active.

My next sighting of otters was some years later after we had a big storm. I was sitting on the porch, and noticed a big 2X4 floating in the lake, a bit of storm refuse. I was pondering how to get it out of there when it suddenly moved, lengthwise, with a little jerk. I stared at it and in a moment it moved again, lengthwise with a little jerk. This time I saw the dark little head at the end of the timber, giving it a small push with his nose. A playful baby otter!

A couple of other people began to sight otters in Shu Swamp, usually at dawn, but everyone was constrained not to spread the word abroad because there was a trapper in Sea Cliff who had a legitimate permit to set traps for fox and raccoon on private property with the owner's permission. We were afraid that if he got wind of Otters in the neighborhood, one or two of them might accidentally get caught in one of his traps, their pelt being extremely valuable.

It was not until Mike Bottini was given a grant to study the Otter populations on Long Island in the winter months of 2008 and his results began to appear in Newsday that we realized there was no

longer any point in secrecy.

By Feb. 2012, Mike had 7 remote surveillance cameras set up in the 3 most active areas on Long Island: Shu Swamp (Mill Neck), Mill Pond (Oyster Bay), and Sunken Meadow State Park (Fort Salonga). Between Feb. 12 and April 5, 28 visits were recorded. Sunken Meadow was the most active with 23 visits and some useful photographs. Three times the cameras recorded groups of 3 Otters, twice in Shu Swamp and once in Sunken Meadow.

In August of 2012, I was driving home along Frost Mill Road when 3 baby Otters emerged from Brinkley Smithers' pond, bounded across the road twenty feet in front of my car and dove under the fence into Shu Swamp just east of Mike's surveillance camera! They were lean and lithe, less than 2 feet long, jet black because they were soaking wet, and absolutely beguiling! This was without a doubt one of the

SEALS, WHALES AND A MANATEE

SEALS

If you want to see a seal on Long Island, you need to wait for winter, and your best bet is to head for Montauk. When scoping the ocean in front of the lighthouse at Montauk to see northern ducks that may be wintering in the ocean there, you must also, if the tide is low, look to the left toward the row of rocks that juts out from shore a half-mile down the beach. This is a favorite haul-out place for Harbor Seals. In March of 1997, I counted 45 Harbor Seals there and one had a baby with it! I was thrilled to see so many in one spot. I was also pleased to see a few Harbor Seals as far west as Jones Inlet that year, including one seal that was cruising along with his tail lifted high in the air! ??

If I thought 1997 was a good year for seal sightings, I was dumbfounded to read the reports in newspapers and nature bulletins in 1998 that 6000 seals were seen in Long Island waters that winter! Harbor Seals are by far the most commonly seen wintering here, but that year a few Harp, Gray and Hooded Seals were seen among them.

WHALES

Sightings of Whales are far less common. Our usual look at a whale is when one gets washed up dead, or nearly so, on the ocean beach. I have had only two occasions to be close to a whale on Long Island; the first was when a large dead whale was washed up on the east end of Jones Beach, near the inlet. This was in the 1970s when it was permissible to walk your dog at Sore Thumb Bay. The whale had been buried in the sand there by the beach crew with a bulldozer but not quite deeply enough. On our way back to the car, our black lab Licorice discovered a part of the defunct whale that was protruding through the sand. It was profoundly ripe and Licorice rolled in it in ecstasy. The trip home was memorable as the four of us tried to hang out the windows to get some fresh air. To this day, that smell was the worst I have ever experienced.

The other sighting was quite different. Also in the 1970s, a one-ton sperm whale washed up on the east end of Jones Beach, suffering from labored breathing. The nearby Coast Guard Station, on the west end of Fire Island, came to the rescue. They put a rope around his tail and towed him through the inlet to the Coast Guard Station where they had a boat basin with a locking gate. There he remained, swimming slowly around, listing to one side. He was diagnosed as having pneumonia and a lady official was detailed to give him antibiotics. She managed to dose him what was estimated to be correct for a one-ton animal, but he wasn't getting better. Newsday picked up on the story and dozens of people, including me, came to see Spermy, the Sperm Whale. He didn't look so hot. Finally, in desperation, the lady official took a whole pound of penicillin and stuffed it down his throat. Then he turned the corner and fairly rapidly got better! He began to swim around his pen and when he sounded (dove to the bottom), a good sign, it was decided he was well enough to leave. So they opened the gates and eleven boats escorted him out the inlet to the open ocean. Once there, at about three miles out, Spermy dove and was not seen again that day. But two weeks later, a plane spotted a pod of Sperm Whales fifty miles out in the ocean and there was Spermy, swimming around with them. How did they know him? By the rope burns on his tail!

THE MANATEE

On Labor Day of 2011, probably the most unusual mammal ever to have graced the shores of Long Island appeared below the spillway of Beaver Dam in Mill Neck; a big adult Manatee, otherwise known as a Sea Cow. He came in on the high tide and by the time I heard about him, he'd gone out with the tide so I missed seeing him.

Manatees are large slow vegetarians, native to warm waters in the Caribbean and Florida, but they have fairly recently been spotted in northern locations like Chesapeake Bay, New Jersey, New York City, and along the sound to Conn. and Rhode Island.

One dramatic story is of a Manatee, dubbed Ilya, who was rescued in New York Harbor on October 27th in 2009. It was deemed that the waters were becoming too cold for him (It was thought then that Manatees need water that is 68 degrees or warmer) and he needed to be rescued. He was trapped in a net with a great struggle, having escaped three times, then tranquilized, given antibiotics and transported with care by truck and plane to the Miami Seaquarium where he was watched by a vet and eventually released in the Keys. He lost about 100 lbs during his ordeal, although in Miami he weighed in at a reasonable weight of 1100 lbs.

Some think that global warming is responsible for their northern peregrinations but records exist of sightings well north of their southern habitats in the 19th century. In any case, this endangered mammal is welcome whenever he chooses to visit us!

SMALL NOTES ABOUT SMALL MAMMALS

BATS

Though Beaver Lake is a large shallow lake which is full of bird, fish and insect life I seldom see bats hunting the air over it and I have often wondered why. However, on Oct. 3, 2006 I did see 3 or 4 good-sized bats circling over the water. Because of their size, they were identified as Red Bats in migration.

I had occasionally had a glimpse of Red Bats before. Once one emerged from its roost in my neighbors' trees and, while flying straight out for the lake, it passed behind our American flag, hanging slack on its pole. Only it never came out the other side. When I crept cautiously around to the back of the pole, there it was snuggly swinging in the folds of the flag!

Another Red Bat I once saw was flying around in the sunshine over a patch of briers near the back gate to Piping Rock Club. As it happens, they are not as nocturnal as other bats and so I was well able to see in the sunlight that its body was cinnamon brown and furry while its wings were a duller shade of brown.

That Red Bat was in the month of May but when I saw a bat in January 2006, swooping around in the woods just behind the 16th green at Piping Rock I was really astonished! What could a bat find to eat in winter? I was told that wintering bats will hunt for winter-flying moths on a mild day. It was about 40 degrees that day but it had been freezing the night before. That didn't seem very mild! I was told this was probably a Red Bat as they will fly in daytime but this one lacked the usual foxy red color. However, whatever the species, in my estimation that was some tough bat!

EASTERN COTTONTAIL

A place on the edge of a lake is not prime rabbit country. There is some lawn but it is mostly wooded and surrounded by water so there isn't much shelter for fleeing rabbits. I am pleased to see them on the lawn on big rabbit years though we worry about them being hawkbait.

We did see one amusing episode with a very young rabbit on a warm September day. This little fellow was snoozing with his back against the house by our back door. A pair of Song Sparrows were peacefully scratching around nearby. Suddenly one of them hopped over and pecked the rabbit on the end of his nose! Now what was that all about? Nevertheless, the bunny just shook his head and went right back to snoozing again.

EASTERN CHIPMUNK

Since the death of our last cat, we have a lot of Chipmunks around. They have tunnels all over, mostly close to the house, and in fact, (since we have no screens,) if I'm sitting quietly on the porch, one will come up the steps, short-cut across the brick floor and leaves by running up the wall and out into the shrubs at the back corner. Occasionally I get a sit-up inspection for a few minutes before the little guy departs.

One day, my husband and I saw the other side of Chipmunks. We were having supper on the porch when a baby Mockingbird began begging from its nest in the Holly bush at the corner of the porch. The mother Mocker responded by scolding from another bush nearby. Suddenly a Chipmunk whizzed into sight, running for its life across the porch with the mother Mocker right on its tail! It came to my mind then that I had read somewhere that Chipmunks will eat eggs and nestlings at times so the reason for the Mocker's aggression became clear. (The next day she drove a Grackle out of a Maple tree and pursued it as if she'd like to kill it! What a protective mother!)

LONG-TAILED WEASEL

On a July day in the 1970s, when we were living in Brookville I walked into our living room and there on the hearth sat a Weasel! I announced its presence to the kids in the kitchen and told them to shut the dogs into the laundry. The Weasel took off and we were able to ascertain that it had come in through the open greenhouse door. We had a little lean-to greenhouse which had heated up a lot in the July weather and so I had opened the door from the greenhouse into the house and its door to the garden to get a little air moving through.

There, amongst the pots was a sleek little female Weasel, the evident object of his attention. She flew out the door with the bigger Weasel after her and at that moment the dogs appeared, running around the house. Someone had let them out! Things got really busy right then. I'm not sure where the female Weasel went but our big black lab Licorice was hot after the male who lined out along the front of the house. Now, there was a small right-angled set-back where the front of the house met the garage. We had a pet game hen who had only one eye and her favorite place to sit with her chicks was in that right-angled nook because she could put her blind eye in and look out with her good eye. When she heard and saw the commotion of the Weasel chase, she flattened herself out on the ground. Running full speed into the garage the Weasel went right over her flattened head and kept on going, finally making his exit from the garage through the doggie-door in the back. And that was the end of a brisk few moments at our Brookville house!

GRAY SQUIRREL

In December of 1996 I happened on a strange sight at the West End of Jones Beach. There was a Gray Squirrel feeding on tidewrack fully ¼ mile from the nearest tree. I watched him for quite a while and when he had finished searching for food in the tidewrack, he slowly hopped up toward the beach grass, totally vulnerable to the Marsh Hawks that frequently patrol there. Later I saw the tracks of another Squirrel way down the beach, heading for the ocean. I mentioned these odd sightings to a number of people and it was Al Lindberg

who finally made sense out of what I had seen. He pointed out that Jones Beach is where people dump squirrels which are bothering their bird feeders. They catch them in Have-a-Heart Traps and release them at West End where there are windbreaks of Japanese Black Pines along the edges of the parking lots. They think they're doing the Squirrels a favor but in actual fact, those clumps of Pine are already occupied by an entrenched population of Gray Squirrels which resent intruders and will fiercely drive them away. I have since seen two dead Gray Squirrels out on the dunes, victims of starvation or attack.

Most sightings of Squirrels are of gray streaks bounding around in the heights of trees. Their acrobatics are really worth watching at times and when you see a perfectly fantastic leap from one branch to another, you wonder if they ever miss?

In July of 2008, a group of us were inventorying plants in Alley Pond Park in Queens when we heard a hard thump behind us. We turned quickly and there was a Gray Squirrel picking himself up off the ground and heading for a tree. None of us had ever seen a Gray Squirrel actually fall out of a tree and the best thing about it was that the Squirrel was undamaged and quickly scrambled up that tree.

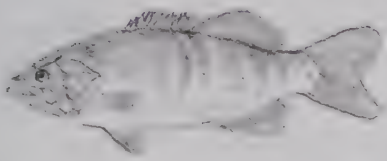
I have to say my favorite Squirrel is a Black one that frequents my bird feeder in winter. What a lovely animal she is (so graceful, it's got to be a "she"!). Her coat is sleek and shiny, her tail hair fine and full; she makes the Gray Squirrels around here look plebeian. She lives across the road alas, but I treasure the days when she visits us!

FISH AND TURTLES

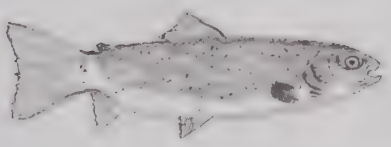
FISH

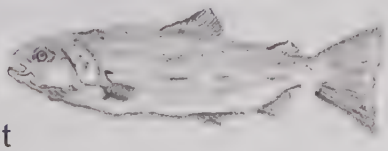
The incidence of fish-eating birds in the area indicates that our local waters probably have a good supply of fish to feed them. The Ospreys, Eagles, Cormorants , Egrets, Herons and fish-eating Ducks must be able to count on a pretty good population of fish.

But what fish are here? Certainly Carp and their cousins Goldfish are visible in Shu Swamp stream system. The D.E.C. (Department of Environmental Conservation) conducted electrofishing surveys in 1995, 2000 and 2002, and because the Shu Swamp stream system had originally been one of the few stream systems on Long Island which contained Brook Trout, they were anxious to restore the native fish if at all possible. The problem was that the European Brown Trout , which are larger and sportier, had been stocked for fishing years ago in Shu Swamp and they had eliminated almost all the native Brook Trout. The North Shore Wildlife Sanctuary Ass'n, gave permission for this activity and Norman Soule of the Cold Spring Harbor Fish Hatchery assisted the D.E.C.



I was allowed to see and photograph the native denizens of the brook on one of these electrofishing surveys and finally was able to see for myself what else lived in the water than I had been looking at. To conduct one of these surveys, a section of the stream was selected and two men with long-handled electric rods walked slowly upstream, passing the rods under overhanging vegetation on the banks where fish lurk. Stunned (not killed!) fish floated up to the surface and a man with a net





scooped them up as he walked behind the shockers. He in turned passed them up to another man on the bank who received the fish in a bucket of water. This was carried to a nearby sorting station where each fish was measured, sexed, and aged in a wet wooden trough. This gave me the chance to photograph each species as they lay in the trough. From there they were placed in another bucket of water to recover and then carefully placed downstream behind the electroshockers so they wouldn't get shocked again.

In this process I was able to see Golden Shiners, Brown Bullheads, Yellow Perch, Brook Lampreys, Largemouth Bass, Nine-spined Sticklebacks, American Eels, Bluegills and Brown Trout. The most interesting were the Brook Lampreys which are small and, unlike the larger species which latch onto saltwater fish as parasites, spend their entire lives in brooks and do not parasitize other fish, and the hundreds of Nine-spined Sticklebacks which are very small and form the basic food supply for a majority of the other species.

Interestingly, no Goldfish were recovered as they evidently spend their entire lives up in Mr. Smithers' pond where they were stocked. I have to chuckle because more than once I have seen an exasperated parent of a hungry baby Osprey finally respond to the baby, fly off and shortly come back with one of Mr. Smithers' goldfish to still the baby's hunger. Orange juice for breakfast?

Though easily available, I have only seen Ospreys bring them to the babies two or three times. Their meals, as far as I can tell consist largely of Snappers secured down in Mill Neck Creek or nearby Oyster Bay, though other species I cannot identify.

My feeling is that they do not often bring carp to the nest – are they too scaly or bony? However there is one bird that relishes carp. One summer day in 2013, a mature Bald Eagle zeroed in on a good-sized carp and caught it near our front lawn front of Tom, our warden and Patrick, who works for me. He then wheeled and flew toward the Sound to eat his fish in peace.

THE CARP

I have a glimpse of something dark,
Barely rising into view,
something full of life, surging from the deep,
sinking back again into its hidden world.

Suddenly the water breaks:
A shining fish comes sailing out,
twisting, golden-bellied, coarse and strong.
It splashes back to disappear
in rippled circles on the quiet lake.

How many fish like that are there below?
How much is there I cannot see?
How convoluted is that underworld?
Hidden like my inner self?

The yellow-bellied one is integral
to the life within the lake.
It functions there,
a bottom-lover, a lowly kind of fish.

I know that if my inner 'carp' leaps up at times,
I will acknowledge that it's part of me.
I'll disapprove of it but laugh
and tell it with compassion
that it's yellow-bellied like the fish!

TURTLES

Freshwater turtles in Beaver Lake are chiefly two: Painted Turtles and Snapping Turtles. The females of both of these have come up on my lawn after a rainy spell in spring and dug nests in the soft earth where they lay their eggs and leave them to incubate by themselves. This year a Snapper made her nest in front of me and laid her eggs in it. I photographed the female as she was in a trance while laying her eggs. She was about a foot long, a modest size as Snappers go. Unfortunately for her, a raccoon dug up her nest in a week or two and had a feast on the eggs.

Shu Swamp actually produced a record-size Snapper a few years ago. I had seen a large Snapper in Shu Swamp, looking moribund in the marsh after a spell of cold weather. I told Norman Soule of the Cold Spring Harbor Fish Hatchery about it and he came up two days later with his truck and an assistant named Joanna, a 200 ft. rope, a huge net and boots up to his arm-pits. He had quite a collection of turtles in the fish hatchery and was eager to get a record Snapper to exhibit with them. The record Snapper on Long Island had been measured with a 19" carapace – that is measured from the neck-hole to the tail-hole. It doesn't sound huge, but when there's an enormous head and neck at one end and a ten-inch tail at the other, it makes for a big turtle of fifty pounds or more.

The Snapper in Shu Swamp was still lying, looking half-dead out on a muddy islet at the east end of the pond. Norman started out from the shore toward the turtle but immediately sank in soft ooze up to his knees and Joanna and I pulled him out with the rope. Using a different approach, he circled around, found some solider footing and approached the turtle slowly. But the moribund turtle suddenly came to life and Norman had a big struggle to get the net over its thrashing head. However he succeeded and dragged the turtle back to shore wrapped up in the net. Joanna and I helped

carry it to the truck and the three of us together hoisted it into the flatbed of the truck. We stood panting and suddenly became aware of the sound of running water. There were drainage holes in the bed of the truck and they were gushing liquid on the ground. Norman and Joanna laughed at me and said that's what turtles do when in distress. Norman quipped, "There goes four pounds!"

In actual fact when he got the turtle to the Hatchery and put it on the scales, it weighed 69 pounds and equaled the size record of a 19" carapace. He named that turtle Junior and kept it in the raceway at the Hatchery. He fed it dead trout, and the next year it weighed about 75 pounds. Somebody stole it from the raceway that year and notified the hatchery about two weeks later that it could be found in a garbage can on the back driveway of the High School. Norman rescued it and put it back in the raceway but it died a month later. It had evidently been dropped and injured internally. Most people do not realize that you have to pick up Snapper from behind its mid-point (pretty hard to do when it weighs 69 pounds) or its very long neck and head can reach around and grab you. That's probably why it was dropped.

Well, that's not the end of the record turtle story. A year or two later, Norman came here with his boat and set sail on Beaver Lake to find another very big turtle. He did find one, not quite as big as the last and took it back to the Hatchery to see if it might grow into a record Snapper. He fed it, not only dead trout, but trout food as well. This one he named Tiny and the last time I saw Tiny, he was grossly fat in the head and neck. He weighed 80 pounds , looked disgusting and subsequently was being put on a diet – dead trout only, no high-calorie trout food!

I had the chance to photograph a very large Snapper in Shu Swamp in 2013. He didn't see me and swam right towards the viewing platform where I stood. I was able to look right down on him and see the twin ridges on his back that big old Snappers develop. He was not as big as Tiny but a respectably large–size turtle at that!

Snappers are fresh-water denizens but there is a fascinating salt-water turtle in our waters and that is the Diamondback Terrapin. It is nowhere near as big as a Snapper – an adult is about 11" long – but

with its pearl-gray black-spotted head and its colorful diamondback scutes, it is a really lovely animal.

In May of 1991, below the causeway which is the north edge of Beaver Lake, the tide was high and there were about 100 Terrapin heads swimming around the saltmarsh. As I watched the turtles milling around and diving frequently, I realized that there were as many turtles under the water as there were above at any given moment. That meant that there could have been 200 Terrapin there. I learned later that Mill Neck Creek is one of the biggest Terrapin breeding grounds in the northeast.

In May of 1999 there were about 130 gathering there at high tide and in 2013, Mary Normandia and I spotted at least 60 Terrapin basking there on a mud bank. When she drove back she said there were about an equal number on the back side of that mud bank.

Terrapin burrow into soft mud to hibernate for the winter but in the winter of 1992, we had temperate conditions for a week or so around Beaver Lake followed by a sudden drop to zero one night. The next morning I skated on the lake, relishing the crystal clear ice that had resulted from the sudden freeze. I chuckled as carp, startled to see me through their clear ceiling, scooted away in horror in a puff of mud. Then suddenly I saw a beautiful Terrapin on the bottom, clear as a bell. It was paddling slowly among the leaves seemingly indifferent to the fact that it was in fresh water, not salt. Fifty feet away I saw another one, also paddling slowly along. When I inquired of several naturalists about Terrapin being in fresh water in winter, I was told that they do indeed winter in pond and stream bottoms that are fresh, and that what I had seen was a couple of Terrapin which had been out in the preceding mild weather and were slowly working their way back under the leafy bottom to hibernate after the sudden freeze.

I like to swim in salt water in the summer but only once did I have the pleasure of seeing a Terrapin swimming along beside me . It was in Cold Spring Harbor not far from the Sound. I was charmed but it didn't share my delight and took off as fast as it could.

TO BE FREE

When I hear the summer crickets shrilling in the night
or the splash of leaping fishes in the waning light;
When I see the Vees of geese on a bright October day,
or feel stirred by sunlit leaves as they unfurl in May:
When I see a molehill, fox track, ancient tree,
I am caught by the thought, "I am not free."

They know what they are doing without a deviation.
If I begin a project, I am full of hesitation.
Trees go through their cycles automatically.
Fish do not seek perfection as the swim throughout the sea.
Foxes do not weigh what is right or wrong in life.
The mouse is not concerned about another's strife.

The cricket doesn't worry that he hasn't got it right;
He responds to what is in him as he chirps throughout the night.
Above all, migrant birds seem filled with certainty;
The energy they project is palpable to me.
Not one of them needs healing; every one of them is whole.
I can't conceive of what that's like with my imperfect soul.

Trying to ignore the call of other voices,
I daily make decisions about which path to take,
Weigh the good and bad of things the moment that I wake.
Many things need healing as I zigzag down the trail:
My path is seldom evident and I so often fail.

If I could only live God's chosen way for me
Like moles and birds and fish without uncertainty;
Like the cricket and the fox and every growing tree,
and all the simple natural things that have ever come to be,
purposeful and whole as they, then it seems to me
I'd be free, I'd be free, I'd be free!

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To all the naturalists
who have opened our eyes to the natural world
with their love and expertise.

North Shore Wildlife Sanctuary Inc.

The North Shore Wildlife Sanctuary Inc. was formed in 1963 to preserve and protect eleven outstanding natural areas, totaling 275 acres, along the north shore in Nassau County:

Allsopp-Fisher - salt marsh
Bird Roost Preserve - Beaver Lake
Coffin Woods - 73 acres of mature woods
Matinecock Farms - meadows in Matinecock Farms
Merrill Meadows - meadows west of Friends Academy
O'Rourke Preserve -16 acres of Beaver Lake
Osprey Preserve - Mill Neck Creek
Pennoyer Woods - deciduous woods east of Matinecock Farms - 25 acres
Powell Pond - salt pond south of East Island
Raikes Preserve - woodland stream flowing into Beaver Lake
Shu Swamp (Charles T. Church Nature Reserve) - woodland swamp - 64 acres

Three of these invite a walk: Coffin Woods, which is laced with trails under huge oaks and Tulip trees, Shu Swamp, a well-known and beloved woodland swamp in Mill Neck which has outstanding ephemeral wildflowers in early spring and Pennoyer Woods, a mature deciduous woodland which was very hard hit by Sandy in 2012 and is under repair. These preserves are open during daylight hours except Fridays.

All of the preserves harbor unique wild plants and animals and are examples of precious ecosystems to be treasured for the peace, the knowledge and beauty they bring to our lives. To find out more about them, contact Tom Hornosky, Warden at 516-671-0283.

If you would like to make a tax deductible contribution to their care, we would be most grateful for your help:

North Shore Wildlife Sanctuary Inc.
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